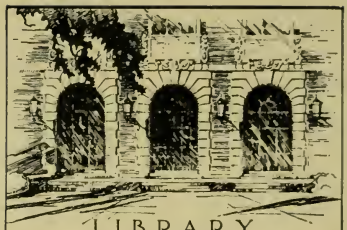

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THE CABINET SECRET.

BY

LEIGH SPENCER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CHAPTER I.

"MABEL, my dear, I wish you would get me something else. I don't like it."

Such was the querulous plaint of the old man at No. 5, Newman's Buildings, to Mabel, as he pushed aside his plate on which was some meat, which, disguise it as Deborah had tried to do (and succeeded) in her very best manner, would persist in showing that it was its third appearance on the table.

"Yes, papa, dear, I will see," was Mabel's despairing rejoinder; adding more hopefully, "Look, here are some nice fresh water-cresses mamma has been having, will you try some too, and the bread and butter."

Poor Mabel!—it was but a poor subterfuge, and would soon fail her; even its succeeding for the moment was almost beyond her hopes, and the old tale soon began again.

"Mabel, I want my dinner, my dear. Why does not Deborah bring it? I don't think she does it so well now—you must speak to her,

Mabel—I like my dinner," he added, pitifully.

Poor old man!—there was not much more left for him to like; not much in which he had power to take an interest now, so there was more excuse for his thinking so much of the table, dwelling again and again on the daily pleasures of gastronomy.

"Perhaps Deborah will have something very nice for tea, papa," suggested Mabel; the morrow's possible dinner was too far off the poor invalid's realization to be a very useful comforter, under present circumstances.

"But I like my dinner, Mabel," was still the piteous answer; "I can't think why I don't get nice things now. It's all altered—all. I wish Mr. Marsden would come back, he would set it to rights," and he gave a sad, hopeless sigh.

Mabel stifled the echoing one that had risen in her own breast as he spoke, and tried to manage some appetising *mélange* of the viands at her command; while she again soothed him as best she could. It was an almost every-day occurrence now, this complaint about the dinners; and truly there was some foundation for it, since, do what she would, and she spared no pains or care, poor Deborah could not cater so well on two-thirds of the sum she had hitherto received for the household expenses, as she could on the whole. Nor could Mrs. Lee help her in that, though in some

few things her early intimacy with foreign life, in its most minute domestic details, did very excellent service now to her own family.

Alas! things had not grown brighter within it. No remittances had come from America, or seemed likely to come at present; it was a particularly dear season in Merestown, and the mother and daughter often sadly calculated together how far their slender purse could possibly be made to go in procuring little luxuries for their precious invalid.

The only bit of silver lining to that heavy cloud now shrouding them was that Mabel had in a measure recovered something of her former brave spirit. The happy brightness and buoyant playfulness were gone for ever, as her mother feared, but there remained—rather had come back—the resolute endurance, the sweet spirit of more than resignation, of contentedly making the best of every little advantage they possessed, or, as some might have wonderingly observed, imagined they possessed. She was once again the support and the light of her home. She carried a weary heart still, poor child, but she had striven manfully against that terrible depression, that dreadful dull feeling of hopeless despair that had crept over her for a time, and was now more than ever alive to every little thing by which she could lighten her mother's cares, amuse the tedium of the hours to the poor invalid,

and altogether cheer the home hearth now surrounded by so many cares and sorrows.

A project had been gradually forming itself in her brain for many weeks past for doing more than this, and at length, as the necessity of it, or something like it, seemed growing more and more apparent, she resolved on broaching the matter to that staunch friend and sole ally, Dr. Armsdaile. So she waited her opportunity as patiently as she could, although, like all such opportunities, when they are earnestly desired, it seemed long in coming. Indeed, the good man, in happy ignorance of Mabel's desire for a *tête-à-tête*, took considerable pains to contrive his visits so as to find them all assembled, believing, very justly, the relief and break of them greater and more welcome then. Besides, since all hope of the restoration of his old friend to his ancestral home had finally gone out, the good old man had been sedulously looking up his practice, or rather, it would be more correct to say, he willingly went after all the practice that sought him.

This had not been the case of late years, since, a childless widower for many, Dr. Armsdaile had rather avoided than sought new patients. He had more than enough to satisfy his simple wants; hale and brisk as he was, the alloted age of man's strength and labour—without sorrow—was fast

approaching him, and he was more than willing, as he said, to leave the field for younger and more anxious practitioners. But the result of his painful cogitations over the Lees' now decided future was the total change of his own line of conduct; and as he was not only a very talented but a very popular man, it was no sooner found that he no longer rejected new patients, than the calls on him became daily more and more numerous, and it was with difficulty he found leisure to bestow even half the usual time on his visits to Newman's Buildings; and though in this case they knew the cause of the change, and Mabel secretly wondered at it—Mrs. Lee possibly had some faint glimmering of the probable motive—yet it was greatly felt and very much lamented, telling not a little, as it did, on the irritability of the invalid, whose great galas these visits were.

So it was a long time before Mabel had the chance of having the Doctor all to herself in the morning. However, the chance did come at last, and no sooner did she see the brougham stop at the gate, than she ran out of the door to waylay her old friend in the passage.

"Well, little lady, what now?" he asked, caressngly patting her on the shoulder, as she preceded him along the narrow passage.

"Please come in here first for a moment," she

answered, turning into the sitting-room. "I've been wanting to speak to you for, oh! such a long time."

"Ay! indeed! And what about? You do look as if you had the care of three worlds on your shoulders, I must say!" he added, as he sat down in the chair she pushed towards him.

"I'm afraid they are hardly broad enough to carry my own little bundle well!" she answered, smiling; "but please sit down comfortably."

"Why, am I not?" cried he. "You've pushed me into your father's own special seat, my dear."

"Yes, but I meant please don't look in a hurry."

Dr. Armsdaile laughed.

"How am I to manage that, pray, when I've just six visits to pay, all in different directions, before two o'clock?"

"But I've something I do so want to talk to you about. You can listen, can't you?" asked Mabel, a little dismayed.

"Not only can, but will, my dear, only let us hear this terrible secret case of yours at once," and he looked somewhat narrowly at her as he spoke.

She blushed, and Mabel looked marvellously pretty when she blushed, as the one fault in her pure complexion was its generally too pale hue.

"You know," she stammered, "we have not been so comfortably off lately, since my uncle——"

"Yes! yes! I know all about that. Well?" cried the Doctor, eagerly. He did so hope an opportunity for helping them, as he ardently wished to do, was coming at last. "Well?" he repeated, as Mabel still hesitated.

"I—I thought perhaps I might be able to make things better—to help a little," and poor Mabel stopped short, while the good old man regarded her with a most ludicrous expression of amazed bewilderment.

"Help, my dear—so you do! I don't understand you!" he said, at last, as she still remained silent, with her eyes fixed on the floor.

"I mean to earn money," she said, at last, desperately.

"Eh?" and the Doctor thought his ears had played him false.

"To try and earn something myself," Mabel repeated, more boldly.

"You!" and the pronoun was so emphasized it conveyed a vast deal more than the monosyllable itself might have done.

"Yes, why? Don't you think I could?" she added, with a grievously disappointed tone in her voice.

"I think you're going to do no such thing," sharply answered her auditor; and he jumped up from the easy chair as though he had been shot.

"I hoped I might be able to teach very little children," Mabel said, humbly—"the piano, at least. Mr. Cardwell used to say I played very fairly."

"Able!" and the scorn with which Dr. Armsdaile uttered the word was absolutely comic in its futile wrath. "And how fitting do you suppose such a thing might be for Miss Lee, little lady, eh!"

"Very fitting now, dear Dr. Armsdaile. She is no longer of the Manor, remember!"

"Pshaw! that's nothing to do with it. I mean Manor or no Manor, it's not fit you should undertake anything of the sort, my dear. You! and what do you suppose your mother would say to such a mad scheme, eh?"

"If you put it to her, as I hope you will, I do not think she would mind it."

"I put it to her? I'll be——"

The Doctor paused only just in time, but he was very angry, very excited, and quite at a loss for polite words to express his feelings with sufficient force.

"Please tell me one thing, dear Doctor Armsdaile," said Mabel, coaxingly; "do you think I am fit, *capable*, I mean, of teaching? Do I play well enough?"

The Doctor smiled grimly in his despair and wrath at her quiet persistency.

"Please tell me!" she repeated, earnestly; and in sheer compassion to her evident distrust of her own powers, he felt compelled to answer the pleading question. Mabel's eyes were ever difficult to resist in their diffident appeals.

"As to your power of teaching, Miss Mabel, I take it no one in Merestown is likely to excel you in that, unless one of the Castle Neville girls took it into her head to turn governess, and even then I don't fancy they are great musicians, any one of them."

"Then if I can do it, why may I not try? Surely there is no degradation in helping myself, Doctor, to get my own living in that state to which it has pleased Providence to reduce me?" she added, gravely and reverently.

That was rather a home-thrust of Mabel's, and perhaps she knew it, the little crafty damsel, for the epitome of man's duty from whence she quoted was a very great favourite of the good Doctor's, and very often did he himself refer to it in instancing examples of the neglect and practical ignorance of its precepts continually exhibited by those who plumed themselves on their propriety of conduct and general knowledge of what ought to be. Dr. Armsdaile hummed and hawed a little before he answered.

"Degradation? No, assuredly not. The degra-

dation is rather the other way, as you know as well as I; but—now, attend, for there is a great deal dependent on that conjunction in this case—there must be an absolute need for it, and it must involve no neglect of other duties, when one in your position undertakes such a labour."

"But," cried Mabel, eagerly, "I never thought of neglecting anything as to papa! How could you think I should?" she added, a little reproachfully. "I am quite free till he is down, you know, except one early visit, and I could do a great deal in the hours I now do nothing—at least, I hope I could."

"Umph! I didn't exactly mean that," Doctor Armsdaile answered, sorely puzzled how to raise up a real obstacle. "I meant what your relations and friends would like you to do. You, at your age, Mabel, and with your face, too—I may as well say it, I don't think you're vain yet—running about the streets from house to house giving lessons. Why, what would Ned himself say to it, think you?"

"I am sure Ned would not think I was wrong to try and give our father the little luxuries he so desires now."

"Now, Mabel, I see your heart's set on this, with some little spice, too, of womanly obstinacy I always fancied *you* free from. However, listen

to reason, my child," and the good old man in despair drew her towards him; and while he held her hand in his, said softly, and as if he were confessing a crime rather than soliciting a favour, "I am a lone man, my dear, an old one, too, and have not much longer to live, probably—why not make me happy by using my purse as if it were your own? It will be so when I am gone, for I have neither child nor nephew, and there is none to whom I could so gladly bequeath what little fortune I have as to you. Why not give me the pleasure of seeing you use some of it now?"

Mabel did not answer for a little while; she could not, her eyes were full of tears, and the emotion the kind words and thoughts had raised was well-nigh choking her. She put her arm round her old friend's neck and kissed him, as she had been wont to do when a little child. Pleased and encouraged to hope the best from this, he fondly caressed her, and whispered,

"You will, wont you, my dear? and let it be a little secret between you and me, Mabel."

She shook her head, but not very resolutely, and at last managed to murmur forth,

"I am not sure it would be right; and yet—oh! how very, very kind you are!" and there she stopped.

"Not an atom of that, my child, so don't

flatter yourself or me with any such nonsense—I am just pleasing myself by doing what I best like with my own. If that is being kind, why, it's a thing most people find very easy. That's all I can say."

"Very sophistical; but I know you mean exactly what you say as to the thing itself, my dear, dear old friend; still, in spite of all you tell me, I think—I think we should be happier if I helped myself, as I just now proposed."

Dr. Armsdaile felt inclined to be really angry. He had hoped to find Mabel less resolute in her independence than her mother was likely to be, or even, could he have had a voice in the matter, her father; but there was the same spirit evidently strong within her; and though he respected it to a certain extent, he did consider in this case it was carried to an absurd length.

"Do you think a Lee would be lowered by accepting what the world might choose to call a favour, at the hand of their medical man?" he asked, a little bitterly.

"Oh! no, no; how can you say or think such a thing for a moment? You are our dear, kind, best, only friend, I may say," and there was a sad pathos in Mabel's voice as she spoke those words; "but this would be a little different from other things. Think how much, how very much you do for us as it is."

"I have no one else to care for, Mabel; you are, if you will allow me to call you so, a sort of child to me now, and it is hard I may not treat you a little as I like—eh?"

"Just as you like in some ways—now and always; but what would dear papa think of such a thing, if he is ever again able to realize such matters?"

Dr. Armsdaile had all but a certainty that this would never be; but he would not pain the tender nature thinking of such a possibility, by telling her how entirely she might leave such a fear out of the question.

"I do not think he would say you were wrong. Believe me, of the two alternatives, the one I ask your acceptance of is the least objectionable—I would have proposed the thing to you long ago, my dear, but that I feared the old opposition you have now met me with."

"It is not altogether my feeling of shrinking from such an obligation," Mabel said, hesitatingly; "but I—I want to help my brother, and I think if I succeed, I might perhaps do a great deal in a small way, and it would be such a relief and comfort to pay back in any way some of my uncle's great kindness; and, besides, it would be good for me too, I am sure—I should feel I was of some use in the world. To work would be so much

pleasanter and easier than to sit helplessly thinking of all the sad things I cannot alter."

"In fact, you are ambitious, little lady, eh? and you want to be up and doing like a man, instead of accepting your woman's portion of patient endurance—is that it?"

"Partly, perhaps—not quite all, though; do you know, I think if I could employ my mornings in some such way, I should do much more good to papa. I want to go out and pick up new ideas, and yet feel I am not altogether idle."

"Ah!—well, there's something in that. Well, wait a week, my dear. I will think over what you have said; and you, meantime, will agree to make me your banker for a little while, for the sake of our old friendship, of the time long ago when you climbed up my knee to pull the big tick-tick you so delighted in and wondered at out of my pocket?"

It was a plea Mabel could not refuse, so the old doctor went home partly relieved. He had great faith in once beginning a thing. The first establishing a new custom was the great stumbling-block generally, in that as in many things—*il n'y a que le premier pas qui coûte*, in truth; and Mabel, not quite so well satisfied, but yet glad that her plan was broached at last, thought the week would not be quite so long as some of the preceding ones had

proved, since there was some certain decision to be arrived at at the end of it.

Dr. Armsdaile was in a brown study for the remainder of the day. Had his patients known how entirely pre-occupied were his thoughts they might not have felt so perfectly content with the fiats he issued, so satisfied with his prescriptions and recommendations. Yet they might have been, for, let what would be filling his large heart and wise brain, Dr. Armsdaile had too much regard for his kind, too full a sense of the great responsibilities attaching to his profession, to allow any matter, however near and personal, to interfere with its duties. Nevertheless, in a brown study he was during his rounds, and in a brown study he continued even after his return home. The result of it was that, in lieu of going to bed when his trusty man-servant appeared with his chamber candlestick, he bid him put it on the round table, wheel the one on which stood his desk nearer the window—which was open still, for the night was sultry, and Dr. Armsdaile did not believe that a closed room could be purer in atmosphere by night any more than by daylight; and then, the servant dismissed to his rest, the old man took up his position in front of his desk, opened it, spread a sheet of paper before him, nibbed his pen, looked at it, sank back again

for a little more reflection, and finally, with an audible exclamation of impatience, dashed off the following epistle :—

"My dear Diogenes,—For I presume you have returned to that character, since so long a time has passed since you left this town, assuring me of the speedy re-appearance you have not yet favoured it with. What are you doing?—what are you thinking of? Do you forget Time's wheel is not standing still while you are dallying over heaven knows what folly—for if you meant to come back here at all, surely folly only can be keeping you away at the time when every one else who can eschews London. Have you entered your name at the Temple as you proposed? But if you have, even Templars are not expected to be broiled alive at this season. You asked me to write to you and tell you the news, and I haven't. I know my sin of omission, you see, and anticipate your accusation by confessing the same. I am more occupied than usual, and I expected you meant to be among us again; in short, I had an idea—a false one I now believe it—that you had found your fate a second time in our little town, and that you would be here again before I had summoned courage to write. A letter is, as you know, my pet abomination—compiling one I mean. Still, I have compelled

myself to endure the task at last, so reward me by writing me at once what you are about, and what are your future plans.

"I don't think I have interesting news for you" —(ah! Dr. Armsdaile, were you quite truthful, quite like yourself in writing that?)—"unless that the Geldfinders have been down here for a month. I saw them once by accident, and heard a good deal of them. He is absorbed in speculation, she more than ever indolent and insipid. Even her sister gave up all hope of extracting further amusement from her, I understand, and in that case she must have become impracticably lifeless indeed, from your accounts of that *ménage*. How angry you used to be, Master Frank, at my comments on the remarks which you once poured out in the plenitude of your blind adoration of your idol! Perhaps fear of encountering her again has kept you away? If so, you are safe now—they are gone. Lockstone himself is going on very much the same, only his daughter forces him into society more than he would himself desire, so it is said, and in the hope of catching one of the Nevilles. The family are all here again now; Lady Charlotte engaged to a nicish sort of fellow, Lord Bridport's only son. They are well content with the match, and between you and me, Master Frank, I don't think they would object to the other. Riches

do cover a multitude of sins now-a-days, there's no doubt, but how can they cover such an escutcheon as Stephen Lockstone's daughter must bring with her? However, all people don't know as much as we do; and as for Harry Neville, the silly boy is madly in love with the haughty beauty, there's no doubt of that; and to give the devil's daughter her due, she does not lead him on. Strange, but she certainly does not, let the gossips and anxious spinsters say what they please, yet his wife will be a countess some day, I suspect; his brother won't marry, Frank, though his parents comfort themselves with that delusion. There, now I'm off to bed; reward this long letter of small talk by sending some account of yourself at once to

"Your old and faithful friend,

"MARTIN ARMSDAILE."

"P.S.—I myself have been rather in care for my dear friends, the Lees, lately. You, of course, having done with the case—have nearly forgotten their existence by this time; but their circumstances are more straitened than ever, and Mabel, who has not been looking herself lately, talks of going out as a daily governess."

And as the Doctor finished his P.S. with a flourish, he again smiled to himself, but this time

it was one of satisfaction. "There," he muttered, "well managed, I flatter myself. If I'm right, it will go deep; if I'm wrong—why, no mischief's done, no trust betrayed. One doesn't know where to have these young fellows sometimes." And he carefully sealed his letter with his huge old seal, and next day posted it with his own hand.

CHAPTER II.

FOR about the twentieth, and now the last, time he looked at it, taking it carefully from its pretty velvet-lined case, and turning it from side to side to be quite sure of its beauties, positive as to the absence of the least defect. Yes, there was no doubt it was the prettiest locket, the very best of its kind, that Harry Neville had ever seen. He was even more content with his purchase now than the day he selected it from amid its crowd of fellows in the case of a first-rate jeweller in Bond Street. It was prettier, yes, decidedly much prettier, than the blue enamelled one; he was very glad he had decided on this one—plain, good, chaste. No fault could be found with it—of that he was quite sure. Would she like it? Ay, there was the point. He wished he could be as certain of that as of the exquisite workmanship of the bauble. Perhaps she would not accept it, and that thought made his heart stand still. Oh! she could not be so cold, so cruel as that. She must; ungraciously, very probably—for that he was prepared; for absolute rejection—

no! How long it was since he had seen her—six whole weeks! What an immense bore it was to have been obliged to stay in town all that time, to act the eldest son for Neville—why didn't he do his own work? There was not one of all those girls to be compared to her. What a sensation she would make in a London ball-room! How magnificent she would look! Should he ever introduce her to one, what a proud, happy day it would be to him!

And then he went off in a reverie till the remembrance of the length of time which had passed since he last saw her again recurred, and at the thought he spurred his horse forward, and soon dismounted at the door of the Manor House. It was open, and he strolled in; he had gained so much in his intimacy that he might venture on this step unannounced. He turned into a morning room where Sarah usually sat. She was not there, but as he came out, disappointed, he heard her voice, and in another moment she opened the library door and stood before him, in all the radiance of her beauty. For the first time in all their acquaintance, too, his sudden presence brought some visible token of emotion to her usually, in such things, passionless face. Her colour deepened, just a shade, and a slight, very slight contraction of both lip and eyebrow be-

tokened a feeling of some sort within. He took hold of her hand and looking rapturously into her face in an instant.

"What an age since I have seen you!"

"And you would celebrate the event by squeezing my hand off," she said with a laugh, disengaging herself from him, but not as if she altogether felt what her mere words expressed.

"How well you are looking; just as I pictured a few minutes ago as I rode along."

"You are fortunate; real pictures have not the credit of coming up to imaginary ones, as a rule."

"Perhaps this does not in all things, or at any rate not to my wishes," he answered in a lower, softer tone.

"It is a great mistake to set your desires too high. Reasonably limit wished-for possibilities, and they may come to pass."

"I was very reasonable. Will my wishes be fulfilled?" and he looked on her very earnestly.

"I confess to doubting your assertion, and won't attempt an answer," Sarah replied lightly, and with rather a less scornful curl than was usually seen on her beautiful lip.

He looked at her intently, but did not press the matter further; and as they walked together down the conservatory began to ask for Jetty, Charon, and other matters which had become in a measure

things of common interest to them in their rides together.

Sarah answered very pleasantly on the whole, and it was quite evident she was not sorry to have him back. He felt sure of that, and his heart bounded at the thought.

"What have you been doing in your grand London world?" she asked presently.

"Wishing myself back here a hundred times an hour generally."

"Pshaw! The old trade of wishing, than which nothing is more unprofitable. I asked what you had been doing; wishing is an idle folly, not an act."

"I said no more than the truth, miscall it as you please. I was out with my mother and sister a good deal; my father wanted me to attend to several business matters; I had some few calls of pleasure—people would have called it—and business on my own account, and through one and all of those occupations ran the vein in all senses of wishing myself here."

"How well your different avocations must have been performed!" And she smiled ironically.

"Judge yourself as to one," he answered, and opened the jewel-case, where lay the beautiful locket.

"A very bijou, indeed, so far as I am a judge,

but I am none in such things. My sister, had she been here, would have answered your purpose in that way far better."

"Scarcely," Harry answered, with a strange sort of smile on his face.

Sarah looked sharply up at him, was about to say something, checked herself, and remained silent, the bauble still in her hand, where Harry had placed it, case and all.

"I bought it in the hope that you would accept it—wear it," he said presently, adding in a lower tone, "if I dared, I would say for my sake."

Sarah hesitated; she did not give it back that instant, and Harry seized the advantage.

"At least accept it as a pledge of—*friendship*, if that word please you best."

Sarah had recovered from the momentary feeling, whatever it might have been, that had kept her silent and passive all this time; she was herself again, and looked Harry steadily in the face long and searchingly. The young man was charmed; he augured well from that look. Unaccountable as it may appear, his love, combined with his own native frankness and sincerity, gave him perfect trust in that strange dark nature which had so attracted his. At last she spoke:

"Be it so, Harry Neville, if it will please you, but only on those conditions—it is a gift of friend-

ship from you, binding neither of us to any thought of aught beyond. As such I accept it."

And she closed the case and was about to put it into the bag which, according to the fashion of those days, hung on her arm, when he checked her, and drawing from his waistcoat pocket a little chain of equally exquisite workmanship with the locket, said,

"Let me encroach a little further. Wear it, and tell me you will never part from it. It may seem a foolish, idle fancy of mine. You have pardoned many such. Forgive this and grant it," he added very earnestly.

He fancied rather a deeper colour than ordinary tinged her cheeks as he finished his speech. He was not sure, but he thought he was not mistaken, and a thrill of joy passed through his heart. That she smiled, scornfully no doubt, but not quite so sarcastically as usual, there could be no question, as she answered,

"You are trespassing, sir, beyond the limits I assigned you—but no matter, you are wise to take me in the mood perchance; this, too, is granted. And now, a truce, if you please, to any further petitions."

Harry longed to ask leave to secure it round her neck, but he prudently forbore, watching the process with delight, as she herself passed the chain

through the ring of the locket, and clasped it round her throat, looking half ashamed, half scorning herself the while ; then he ventured to say,

"You grant me my petition, so give me the promise."

"Pshaw !" Sarah replied impatiently.

"Nay, a bargain is a bargain ; you are too honest to go from your pledge once given, I know."

"Ha ! do you ?" Sarah answered sharply, and her brow contracted for an instant ; "do not be too sure of that, Harry Neville. However, in this case I will be as good as my word, folly as it all is," she added, as though angry with herself for the yielding she could hardly avoid. "What absurdity am I to say ? You had best tell me quickly."

"That you will keep it as long as you live," Harry replied boldly, though he half trembled for the result.

"Bah ! you should be above such trash as that, Mr. Neville. However, I will keep my word, having accepted the thing in a fit of folly—I promise you I will keep it to the end. Now, there's an end of the whole affair, and I tell you frankly I'm perfectly ashamed of my share in it. You, too, should have learnt to be wiser during your London season. Come now, and look at the colts Tuffnell has ; one or two I like, and think of having broken for me."

So Harry followed her to the home farm, secretly exulting at a success that had been far beyond his hopes—beyond all he had at first ventured to imagine possible even, and they resumed the old fashion of riding together, sparring together, and, so far as young Neville was concerned, he again bestowed all his spare time in pursuit of this wayward, discouraging mistress.

Suddenly a change came; Sarah grew moody, sullen, more like what she had been at first, what she rarely was to him now, and she also withdrew herself from the county gaieties, which of late she had attended as regularly as any other of the young ladies of the neighbourhood.

Poor Harry was in despair, and after enduring the change as best he might for some time, and that was very badly—for it was harder to endure now that he had basked in the light of her smiles, than it was at first, before he knew the contrast—he resolved to try and break the ice, and at least know if any reason existed for this most disagreeable variation of mood.

Accordingly he spoke, one afternoon, when they had been pacing in silence for a long time across a dreary stretch of moorland, which seemed now Sarah's favourite ride, affording, as it did in some parts, wide spaces of level turf fit for the wildest gallop, and being broken by rugged, deep-cut

dells and hills, where a foot's pace was the safest, suiting, perhaps, the present temperament of her mind. Young Neville rode close up to her in one of these ravines, and said, in a low, almost a loving tone,

"You have pained and puzzled me greatly of late, Miss Lockstone. I do not believe I have offended you, and yet you are changed towards me."

Sarah turned impatiently, like a tigress at bay.

"Am I bound to be always the same, like a tame, insipid lake, never ruffled by a storm, or to go on coo, coo, coo, like the doves Willis keeps in the conservatory, that sometimes drive me so wild with their monotony, I would fain wring their untiring throats myself? Am I bound to such a spiritless existence as these?—or, in any case, am I obliged, Harry Neville, to give you an account of the whys and wherefores of my changing moods?"

"Certainly not, if you object. I had no idea of intruding over-curiously into your thoughts and feelings—I would not pain you for the world, not even for the old cordiality I have missed so sorely the last few weeks—at least, I hope I would not; but the chance of that would be a strong temptation. I would only be told you are well and happy, and that I have not in any way inadvertently displeased you."

"You have not till now; but I like to live and

move, to smile or be grave, unchallenged, Harry Neville, so beware how you meddle with my moods, if you would keep your privilege of companionship, which you profess to prize so greatly."

"I would use the privilege of friendship to share your cares or griefs, to sympathise with, if I could not help you. Do you deny me this much?"

"Nature does, Harry Neville, if I do not, which saves me the trouble. A tame canary has about as much power of sharing all the feelings of a vulture, as you of sympathising with all the phases of my mind. I warned you of that long ago, remember —if you chose to comprehend me, at least."

"You have no special sorrow on you now, then?" urged Harry, persevering still, though half afraid—and well he might be. But that his tone was so perfectly sincere in its earnest sympathy and anxious tenderness, Sarah would not have borne it an instant. As it was, she answered more impatiently,

"Why should you fancy such a catastrophe? You know no bodily harm has chanced either to me or any of mine—father, mother, or sister. With all these well, what sorrow can I have?" and she spoke with inexpressible bitterness and irony.

Harry looked at her sorrowfully, though fondly, as he answered,

"It is not always an outward, tangible grief or

affliction that tries us most sorely, or is hardest to bear."

Sarah started, and her look softened for a moment, but only for a moment—she replied hardly enough,

"A moral reflection—a bit of philosophy which I suppose I ought to be very proud to have extracted such from Mr. Neville. The motive power must have been considerable."

Harry laughed.

"That is right; I am glad to hear you speak like yourself once more, if it is only to laugh at me."

"Take care, then, or you'll disarm me, by leaving me no inclination to do that," she said, quickly, as she glanced at him, with a strangely mild light in her sparkling eyes.

"Well, at least tell me why you have refused my mother's invitations?—three times she asked you—each time you have said 'No.'"

"I have treated all others in the same fashion."

"Yes; but surely you might have made an exception in our favour."

"I can't see why; I've not given the license I was weak enough to allow you to extract from me, to all your family."

"No, I should hope not," Harry answered, eagerly; "but for that friendship's sake, you might make a little distinction between Castle Neville

and other places, might not you?"

"If I considered it entailed any such consequences on me, I should repent, perhaps abjure it," she answered coldly; and as they had now reached the level again, she shook Jetty's reins, and in a moment was careering over the downs at the utmost speed the mare's mettle could compass. Harry sighed, but stuck his spurs lightly into his horse's sides and followed her.

They had not reached the end of the down, when Sarah suddenly pulled up—so suddenly as to send Jetty on her haunches for an instant; but, totally regardless of this, she wheeled her impatiently round, and said abruptly,

"You have more than once shown an inclination to accompany me in the walks I like to take occasionally about the old town. You shall come this evening, if you will," and hardly waiting his reply, she turned Jetty's head in the opposite direction, dashing across the country towards Merestown, as if, Harry admiringly thought, she had been born and bred the complete horsewoman she had now made herself.

They rode into the town in silence, to the gloomy old house in the High Street. The groom took their horses, and for the first time young Neville followed Sarah into her old home. Not far, however. Opening the door of the sitting-

room once so familiar to her, she motioned him in, and with the brief injunction "Wait here," disappeared herself into the upper regions. In less time than it took Harry—the young man was in love, remember, the first real, strong passion of his manhood—to examine the surroundings, which, as he well knew, had once been hers, she returned, muffled in the old walking-dress that had astonished him before, and with the one word "Come," preceded him down the passage, and by the side-door of the office out into the street. Many a devious and strange way, as it appeared to the young man, she took, and it was getting very dusk indeed before they at length emerged into that new, uncomfortable-looking lane—so it appeared to Harry, who had never been there before—which seemed the termination of their walk, as Sarah stopped suddenly, and with a rapid glance up and down the street, turned into one of the narrow slips of garden, making, as he fancied, some sort of sign to a person within the house as she did so. Half way up the walk she stopped again, and after looking round, as if to see that he still followed her, advanced to the low wall which separated the gardens from each other. Close by the side she once more halted, and pointing with her finger, directed his attention to the lower window of the next house, which was open, and the curtain only

partly drawn, though a lamp burned on the table.

"Look," she said, in a hoarse whisper. "Look, watch, till I bid you come away!"

He obeyed, and soon became so interested in the proceeding, that when, at last, she pulled his sleeve, it startled him. A very bitter and peculiar smile was on her face as she said,

"If you desire it, stay longer, but I am going."

He followed her instantly, and was obliged to walk extremely fast to keep up with her, so rapid was the pace at which she returned into the High Street. Once arrived there, she turned, satisfied herself he was close at her side, and then, still silent, re-entered the house. Leaving him without a word this time, she retreated once more upstairs, and at the instant he heard the horses' hoofs under the old window, she came into the room again, ready equipped for the homeward ride.

"Punctual, am I not?" she said, with a smile, as she held out her watch to him before mounting "I expect my groom to keep time to a minute, therefore I keep it myself."

Harry did not answer, save by one of his bright smiles. He was too full of the scene he had looked on, and longed to know what Sarah would tell him of it; but she said not one word more till they had cantered a good two miles on their way home.

Then she checked her mare to a walk, and said, suddenly,

"Very pretty, and very graceful, is she not?"

"Pretty! She is beautiful!" answered Harry, enthusiastically. "So refined, so elegant! I never saw so sweet a girl!"

"Anyone who wilfully injured or pained her must be a monster of iniquity. Don't you think so?" and as she spoke, Sarah cut Jetty with her whip, so that the indignant mare gave vent to her outraged feelings by a bound, before she curveted into her easy walk again.

"Of course he must. But who would or could? Her looks would disarm the arch-enemy of mankind himself!"

Sarah laughed bitterly, scornfully, as she said,

"My appearance would, on the contrary, act as a challenge to that gentleman, eh?" and she was woman enough to wait rather anxiously for the reply, though she could have beaten herself for the same, and also knew well in her inmost heart that she held a place in Harry Neville's above all rivalry. No feeling of that sort had actuated her in one iota of her conduct, and this was a mere passing folly, for which she felt a hearty contempt for herself all the time that she yielded to it. Yet Harry's answer was soothing, grateful to her, in spite of this.

"You would never think of comparing two such different beings—no one could; at least, I am sure I should not. Then, to be sure, you stand alone with me!"

It was said very simply, and no one, ever so inclined, could have doubted the straightforward sincerity of his language.

"What of the old man?" was Sarah's next question.

"Poor old gentleman! What a wreck he is, mind and body too, apparently; but he is a thorough gentleman, I should say. How devoted his daughter—as I suppose she is—appears to be to him! It must be a great trial of patience and affection, one would think, to tend so sedulously on one so stricken in mind as he seemed, by his look and manner."

"You are quite right, it is a task beyond Job's patience itself, I should be tempted to imagine, especially when it is his weakness which has reduced them to what they are."

"Ah! they were not always in that queer little house, then? I fancied not; both the people and some of the furniture seemed out of place—incongruous, somehow."

"Most wise young David!" Sarah said, mockingly. "Now for your judgment on the third, the wife?"

"A most gentle lady, but with such sadness in

her face, it seemed to me she most of all felt whatever trials they may have."

"She sat where the others could not see her, then. I have noticed that sometimes; when she is in view, she does her best, too, in a quiet fashion. It's a strange home scene," she added moodily, half to herself.

"You know them, of course; who are they?"

"Do not *you* know?"

"I! no; how should I?"

Sarah looked at him through the dim starlight with doubtful surprise for a moment, and then said,

"The Lees of Lee Manor."

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Harry in utter astonishment, and he in his turn gazed on his companion.

What could have been the object in taking him there? Hers in going herself? It seemed gratuitously inflicted self-torture to his generous nature. He was silent in his doubt and amazement.

Sarah soon spoke again, and as she did so there was the faintest shade of trembling in her voice for perhaps the first time in her life.

"You wonder why I took you to look on them, Harry Neville. You wonder why I go myself. For that—it might have been better had I stopped away. No matter now, it is done; but I took you there to show you my father Stephen Lockstone's—

—victims—for that is what they consider themselves, and what their friends call them. Granted that it be so, that this man—my father—has defrauded the Lees unjustly of their right—has usurped unlawfully their possession—suppose the case true—proved, what business has Harry Neville with this Stephen Lockstone's daughter?"

She reined Jetty in as she finished speaking, and turned to him in the darkness, as though demanding a direct, unhesitating, immediate reply.

Harry Neville was startled, confounded; a chaos of thoughts, doubts, had started up in his brain, but he did not hesitate. He never wavered from his trust and confidence in the wild nature he had learnt to love, and so he replied boldly, and at once,

"The father's sin is not the daughter's, and it would affect Harry Neville in no way as to separating them—breaking their friendship."

Sarah bent down her head, bent it till her own dark hair almost touched Jetty's glossy mane, but it was so dark now Harry did not see the movement, and it lasted barely a minute; the next she was upright again, erect as ever on her saddle, but her face was dark and flushed, only that, too, the friendly darkness hid.

There was silence now for some minutes. Harry strove to re-arrange his disordered thoughts, to recall

all that he had ever heard about the Lee Manor business—in fact, he was unconsciously struggling to replace his mind in that happy state of belief that there was nothing unusually wrong in the matter, out of which Sarah herself had so unpleasantly startled him. At length he said,

"Why should you think of such a possibility? I believe that thought is what has been troubling you. Pray—pray put it aside. I never heard any proof, any assertion that your father——"

"Nay, spare yourself the care of choosing your words, and of trying to do away in my mind the notion of that possibility which I suggested for your contemplation. I never said it was so. I simply put it before you as what might be—what has never been proved not to be, and asked how the chance of such a contingency would affect your conduct? I will go further now—what if Stephen Lockstone's daughter was herself concerned in the fraud, if such there be?"

"Sarah!" cried the young man, for the first time addressing her by her Christian name, and speaking in a tone which denoted the pain her words were causing him, "Sarah, why, in heaven's name suggest such wild impossibilities? That your father should have acted towards the Lees—an old family, looked up to and respected for generations in the county—otherwise than as an honest man should,

is not an agreeable thing to contemplate, even as what might be; that you should be even cognizant of such a matter is too improbable, too terrible for the idea to be entertained for a moment; or if such a thing were really possible," he added after a moment's pause, "it must be in some strange fashion, making you, dearest Sarah, a greater victim than the Lees themselves. What a fearful trial it would be to any daughter!"

Sarah laughed a strange, discordant, bitter laugh; it sounded jarringly on Harry's ears, and yet he hoped it was the finish to that incomprehensible mood of hers, a wind-up to those phases of conduct which had been so unpleasant to him, at least in their effects. He hoped it the more when she gave Jetty her head the moment after, and they cantered back to the Manor door without again drawing bridle.

He lingered on the steps after her groom had taken away her horse, bidding her good-bye before remounting his own, as was his usual custom after helping her from the saddle, a task he loved, but was constrained to be very quick to perform, otherwise she would have sprung to the ground before he could reach her side.

She had not spoken one word to him all the way home; and now, too, she was silent, though she allowed her hand to rest in his. Presently she

spoke, low but distinct—"Harry Neville, twice before I have bidden you remember our paths were diverse, for the third and last time I warn you to beware—beware how you seek the society of Stephen Lockstone's daughter. It was not forced on you. It is not fit for you."

And almost flinging his hand from her, she turned and rushed rapidly through the hall and up the wide oak staircase. He could watch her form distinctly through the half-open door by the brilliant light of the lamp suspended from the roof.

CHAPTER III.

THE week of reflection Dr. Armsdaile had appointed, before anything could be decided, as regarded the project on which Mabel had set her heart, was over—at least, so Mabel considered, as, on that very day week, she took up her station by the window, while Deborah cleared away the breakfast, to watch for the well-known, always-welcome brougham, for, of course, he would come early this morning—he knew quite well how anxious she was. But he did not come early—so far from it, that Mabel began to despair of being able to speak to him at all that day, and gave the hope up entirely as her father and the dinner made their appearance, and no sign of Dr. Armsdaile had been seen. He must have been called away somewhere, she supposed; it was very provoking; she had been thinking about it so much, and if she could succeed, it was not well to lose any time. But it was not her old friend's fault—of that she was very sure, so good and kind he was! And so she set herself resignedly to amuse and

occupy her father, giving up all hope of any conclusion being arrived at on that day.

They had not long finished dinner, however, when, not the Doctor, but his brougham arrived, with a message that if Mr. and Mrs. Lee would like a drive, it was very much at their service, and he would look in by-and-by, probably. So it was all right, after all; he would come when he could, and no doubt meant to contrive their tête-à-tête before her parents returned from their drive. So she watched them off well satisfied, and then, to wile away the time, and cheat her own impatience, took up a book, and soon lost herself in its contents. A little while ago, that power of absorption in a book, which made it a real relaxation and relief to poor Mabel, had left her, but it had returned again, and right gladly was it welcomed. Those who have abundance and variety of recreation can hardly realize how the loss or suspension of the solitary one of reading, possessed by their less fortunate neighbours, makes itself felt.

She had been reading about an hour, and had heeded neither the flight of time, nor the opening, first of the outer, then of the inner door, when she was startled by a voice at her side, saying, in somewhat tremulous accents, "I am here at last to claim my welcome—am I again too late?"

The book fell from Mabel's hands; she started from her seat, and the tell-tale colour went and came, as her hands were eagerly clasped in those of Frank Marsden. She made a violent effort to regain her composure, and succeeded so far as to murmur—

"You—you have frightened away all my power of giving one, I believe."

But a very sweet smile followed the words, and Frank flattered himself his welcome was safe. He took a chair, and drew it near to her, saying,

"I am very sorry I startled you so, but to come in at once, when Deborah told me you were here, was irresistible, after being so long away. I began to fear you had quite forgotten me.".

A sort of question, whether they had not had more cause for such a fear than he, flitted across Mabel's mind, but she said nothing; it was as much as she could do to keep up a decent semblance of composure, so tumultuously had her heart begun to beat—so rebelliously, unwarrantably excited was all her delicate frame at sight of the unexpected visitor. She was just wondering whether she would be as foolish if Ned came home suddenly, when Frank resumed—

"I have been away so very much longer than I hoped or intended, but I found more to do than I anticipated, even; besides, I did not want to

reappear before you till I could do so as an embryo barrister. Mr. Lockstone must have given you a horror of simple lawyers."

Mabel smiled, but looked up at him for explanation.

"I am entered in the Temple, shall be called to the bar as soon as possible, and hope, of course," he added, laughing, "to be a judge some day."

"I hope so too, then," Mabel said, simply—she was hardly able yet to realize what he said.

"Do you?—you would like it, then?—you are glad I have taken this step?" he said, eagerly, and bending towards her.

Poor Mabel coloured, and murmured something—she scarcely knew what. Young Marsden looked at her anxiously, and his own complexion heightened considerably as he said, after a little pause,

"Miss Lee, I told you of the boyish folly I took for love long ago; you know how thoroughly I was cured of it—how ashamed I am of even its remembrance. Do you—would you think the real love I could offer now worth acceptance?"

As she sat silent, trembling, hardly understanding, scarcely daring to believe his true meaning, he advanced close to her, and leaning over her chair, continued, in low, earnest tones—

"Mabel, I loved you before I knew what I was

doing—I—will you forgive me?—I almost rejoiced in the failure of all our hopes, because I believed you would be nearer to me now—more likely to listen to me, I mean, as you are, than if you had returned to the Manor. You would have seemed so far above me then; I should have loved you all the same—I could not help myself—who could?—but I should have despaired. Now, Mabel—dear, dear Mabel—dare I hope?"

The poor child, for she was scarcely more than a child in such things, trembled from head to foot. The avowal came upon her like a thunder-clap—she had never understood her feelings, never once speculated on his in connection with herself, and now she felt dazed—as though she could not grasp the reality of his meaning; but she did not withdraw the hand he had again taken, and the thrill that ran through her frame was one of joy. There was no mistake about that.

Frank was not discouraged by this first reception of the avowal of his love, and it was not very long before he made his meaning so very clear, she felt no longer any doubt; while in a little time she, too, understood herself better, and, in short, before half an hour had passed, they comprehended each other so well that Frank Marsden and Mabel Lee were troth-plighted, subject always to the approval of her parents.

"Don't think me very graceless for not asking about them, dearest," Frank said; "the fact is, I had heard all about them from our good old friend who walked with me to the gate."

"Ah! he was coming here——" Mabel began.

"No, he was not—at least, not till I had tried my fortune first, my darling. He suspected, I have a notion, my arguments might have greater weight, if I succeeded, than his, in turning my obstinate Mabel from such a mad scheme."

"Oh! did he tell you of it?" Mabel asked, blushing.

"He did; and, sooth to say, inadmissible as I felt the idea to be, it gave me just the courage I needed to take the plunge. I felt so little worthy of you, Mabel, in any way, it seemed impossible I could win you; but when I heard of this notion of yours I grew very brave—almost hopeful, for I thought—surely it would be better for Miss Lee to be Frank Marsden the lawyer's wife even, than a daily governess. But I shall be more than an ordinary lawyer soon, and now you see the spur that urged me to take that other step I told you of—I wanted to make myself a fitter match for you, my Mabel, if I could win you."

Mabel listened, a happy smile on her radiant face. It was pleasant to know herself so long an object of thought to, the possessor of influence

over the man she had herself learned to love before she really knew what that strange passion was, long before she had an idea it had possessed itself of her own fresh, innocent young heart.

Long they talked together, never weary of hearing again and again the most minute detail, not only of their actions, but of their feelings. Mabel's simple story of that dark canopy of clouds that had gathered round them just after he had left, when the failure of all chance of dispossessing Stephen Lockstone from the Manor had begun the crushing heap of trials to which so many, great and small, had afterwards been added, brought alternately pangs of self-reproach to Frank that he had not risked any wound to his own pride, his own love, rather than let her endure a tithe of the hopeless sorrow that had weighed so wearily upon her. Then it made his heart bound with intense delight, when he fancied he could trace here and there, through her innocent narration, strong evidence that his absence had not been the least of those woes—that he had been sorely missed. Oh! the joy of believing he had sufficient power over that sincere, pure nature, to bring to it pleasure or pain!

As for himself, he told how hardly he had worked to bring matters to a conclusion between himself

and those very acute gentlemen, Messrs. Sharpe, Kewter, and Watchemklose; that they had been good enough to express great regret at the loss of his valuable services, but at the same time could not but allow they should be greatly mistaken if he did not turn out a first-rate barrister, and prove that he had done wisely in changing his calling so far. "Unlike most fickle youths, he would probably prove the rule by the exception," Mr. Kewter had observed, and, judging by the subsequent chuckle he had indulged in, imagined he had been guilty of a bit of facetiousness in so speaking.

They had volunteered more of future help than Frank had ventured to hope would be his for the asking, and he, on his part, had obliged them by continuing one or two cases, which they hinted could not be carried on so satisfactorily by any other person. In short, he had been so very full of business, that it was only now and then he had had leisure to wonder why Dr. Armsdaile had not written to him as he had promised—only once or twice been sufficiently idle and dispirited to fear he might be utterly forgotten in Newman's Buildings—his comings or goings have become a matter of perfect indifference; but he had been very completely miserable when such ideas did occur to him, and conjured up all sorts of ludicrous reasons for the silence of his old friend—that

Mabel had met some one better, worthier—that they were going to be married—were married, and that Dr. Armsdaile did not write to spare him the pain such news would inflict, and other absurdities of the like nature, forgetting altogether that he had not really made any confidant of him, and had no right to believe him certain of his feelings in the matter.

"As it is, he ought to have written before," continued Frank, "and if I could have got down here before my indignation had had a little time to cool, our good old friend would——"

"What, Master Frank?" asked the good old friend's voice at the door that moment—"discover, not for the first time, how remarkably unreasonable certain young people can be at times. Well, little lady," and he turned to where Mabel sat blushing "celestial rosy red," and looking very conscious, but very, very happy, "have you and this wise youth, who is so irate because other folks don't set themselves to do his business for him, settled all preliminaries, and are you about to commence 'teaching the young idea' to-morrow?" and the Doctor bent over Mabel to hide the emotion in his own face, and tenderly kissed her.

Mrs. Lee's consent was readily given to what she saw would make Mabel's happiness. One glance at the bright young face, to which the light

and joy she had feared gone for ever, had returned with double measure, was enough for the mother, when she saw whose presence had brought it. Yes, there could be no hesitation on her part, though, as she observed to Frank, after she had received him as her son, with something of the old consciousness of a want that she had always felt of that dignity she ought to have as mistress of the Manor, but rarely attained to her own satisfaction, though others saw nothing lacking in the gentle courtesy ever characterising her manner and bearing,

"You, Mr. Marsden, are, in yourself, all we could wish; but were it not for present circumstances, it is not quite the sort of match which would have been looked for as suitable to Mabel, as you know."

And Frank said he did know—had known and felt he was unworthy in all ways of his treasure. Mrs. Lee herself could not be more conscious of it than he; still, in point of family, there was not so much difference, as she was aware; and now, unhappily, there was not in position or fortune.

Poor Mr. Lee was as happy as possible at having the young man with him again; and, so far as he was capable of comprehending the matter, was only too glad to ensure his company, at any price.

So everything was arranged to Frank's great

satisfaction, even to the agreement that the engagement should not, and need not, be a long one. He confessed to Mabel, very consciously, that "he had a horror now of long engagements." It was quite true that it might have been more prudent to wait till his terms had been kept, and he "called;" but then he should be very certain not to begin his barrister's career as a briefless one; and, meantime, it was probable his old firm would continue to give him remunerative occupation, if he chose to take it; while, if he did not marry at once, Mabel would be left struggling on very much as she had been, and Frank hardly realised what a marvellously different thing that would be now, when happy first love shed its radiant, roseate hue over all things, gilding each daily trial, each passing sorrow, and turning them almost into joys. He should not be able to be very much with them, hardly at all, indeed, and he believed complete change of scene might do great good to Mr. Lee.

On this point Dr. Armsdaile was consulted, and his opinion was not against the step, if he could not confirm all Frank's eager hopes as to the wonders it might achieve. He believed it would be perfectly safe to remove him from Merestown now; it would be a great thing for him to have a larger house and constant exercise, which Frank was determined he should have, let it cost him more,

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even, than it certainly would, as to hard work. A carriage should take the old man out daily, and his Mabel also, if it should please her to go. How Frank revelled in the anticipation of the little pleasures and relaxations he hoped to procure for her!

"Besides," as he observed to Dr. Armsdaile, "how can I be sure what she might not do still? If I left her on here, that governess scheme might take effect yet, in spite of us, for I'm not at all sure, sir, that if she so unwillingly accepted anything from you, she would be persuaded in any case to make use of me; not till she can't help herself," he added, with a happy smile, "when all that is mine shall be hers, by a law that man cannot break. As to Mrs. Lee, I am quite certain nothing would induce her to take one farthing from me at present; and Mabel and I shall have to manage matters very warily by-and-by even," and the young man looked as if he particularly enjoyed the anticipation of difficulties to be then met conjointly.

And the good old Doctor looked and listened, approved and sighed. What would become of him, with the Lees no longer within his reach? He had learned to love Mabel as his daughter, and knew how sorely he should miss them all.

"If I weren't too old to be safely torn from

my moorings of all these years, Frank," he said, with a doubtful smile—there was more of sadness than merriment in it, "I'm not sure but I should follow you up to town myself, and start a new practice—a mad doctor, people would call me, if I did so, and more justly than is often the case."

Nevertheless, the old man would probably have made up his mind to leave Merestown, and go after those he loved so well, though not certainly to start afresh in his profession, but for his desire to make a worthier fortune for Mabel. That had far more to do with his remaining than any old associations with the place where he had lived so long—late events had done much to alloy the once unmixed feelings of interest and attachment with which he had regarded it.

"And when is all this migration to take place?" he asked presently.

"Not much before the beginning of the year, I am afraid. Mabel naturally wishes to hear from her brother first—indeed, it is but right; he is of age now, and is her natural guardian at present, under existing circumstances, and I have a great deal to see to and prepare, and a house to take. By the way, don't you think a little out of town, if I can meet with such to suit us, will be best?" and the young man launched, with all the ardour of the young expectant head of a household, into

speculations and details, all the more interesting and precious to him as they were so entirely new.

To him it seemed something of a holy privilege to be the responsible chief of a family, the bread-winner, the guardian. He had been debarred since babyhood almost from all practical knowledge of the pleasures and the pains, the cares and the delights, of that earthly paradise of genuine Englishmen—that sweet comforter of the weary—that cheerer of the sad and worn—home.

So brightness had come once more to No. 5, Newman's Buildings; the clouds had broken, and there was sunlight again—to one heart therein such joyous golden sunlight as seemed to come direct from heaven; and very happy, and very busy the little family were, all in their different ways. Frank Marsden, too, lingered on, working late and early, so satisfying himself that he was not wasting his time. And the autumn days grew shorter and shorter, darker and colder, but the light and warmth within defied the outward atmosphere to take effect upon the human hearts there. Asking pardon of the shade of Dr. Johnson, who must have been in a grievously cavilling state of dyspepsia when he asserted anything so untrue to nature, and with all respect for the opinion of the wise and would-be philosophical, there are other hearts than those of fools which are affected by the

change from the gloom and storm of winter to the warm sunshine and gentle breezes of summer.

One morning Frank and Mabel were sitting together in the little parlour, illustrating very forcibly the truth of another axiom—that of their being "nought new under the sun;" for they were repeating the old tale listened to with fresh interest through all the many thousand years of the world's creation since Adam and Eve began it in Paradise; and it was not particularly new, even to themselves now, but very sweet still, notwithstanding. Frank, who had been idly gazing on the opposite wall all the time he was not looking at Mabel, sat near the old cabinet, and commanded a view of the fireplace, with the wall on either side, when he suddenly started up, exclaiming,

"Why, Mabel, what is the paper divided here for?—I never observed it before. Look—how very queer!"

"It isn't divided," Mabel answered, without looking up, for she was intent on the work she held in her hand; "there is a sort of closet there, and we had it papered over; it would never have done, you know, for papa to have seen a cupboard in his dining-room!"

And though she sighed a little over the last word, its utterance was accompanied with a smile.

"Nay, but it is divided—come and look," and Frank, who was now standing close to the long line that had attracted his attention, pointed to a very unmistakable slit.

Mabel saw it, even before she got to his side, and looked with great surprise at the division, some two yards or more in length. It had been smoothly and skilfully cut, for not a jagged edge or rough point was to be seen; but that it had been cut was very evident, and that not very recently, as the paper's beginning to curl up in places at the edges showed. Very slight was the curl, however, in some places scarcely visible, though on the whole sufficiently evident to have caught Frank's eye, as it was no doubt this which had originally attracted his attention.

"How very strange!" said Mabel, as they both stood gazing on it; "and see, it is the same at the top and bottom! The man must have made a mistake, and cut it after the paper was up; but it is odd we never observed it before."

"No, it has not been done so long ago as that," returned Frank, who was examining it carefully.

"I am very glad papa never happened to see it. I hope he will not, nor—— Oh! Frank, what are you going to do?" as Frank deliberately put his penknife into the narrow aperture, and endeavoured to draw open the door.

"Trying what other discoveries I can make, my darling," he answered, with a reassuring smile. "I can't have mysterious slits appearing in the casket which holds my most valuable jewel, and must arrive at the bottom of this business, whatever mischief I may do."

So he passed his knife down, and presently the door gave way, and burst open. Nothing very alarming was disclosed within, however—only a very dusty narrow closet, quite empty. Frank looked curiously round.

"The dust has not been disturbed here for many a long day," he observed at last—"that is satisfactory so far."

He did not seem satisfied, however, as Mabel laughingly told him, for he rapped each of the three walls more than once, and finally, again and again, tried both his knuckles and his knife against that which formed the back of the closet.

"Light me a taper, will you, dear?—it is not all right here."

Mabel brought him a wax light from the table, and no sooner did it throw its light within, than they both saw what the dimness of the day had quite hidden from them in the shadow of the closet—a slit, namely, similar to the one on their own side of the premises, in the back of the closet,

which ought to have been the wall of the next house.

"Doors of communication between the houses in Newman's Buildings!" exclaimed Frank, with increased surprise, "this is very extraordinary, Mabel, surely?"

And he turned as though half hoping that she might be able to throw some light upon the matter.

"It is odd; but I suppose this was meant as a sort of double closet—half for each house."

He shook his head in doubt.

"Who is your neighbour on this side, my love?" he asked.

"That man."

"That disgusting looking scoundrel, do you mean, Mabel?—good heavens!"

And Frank looked red and angry.

"Dear Frank, what harm could he do us, in another house," pleaded Mabel gently; but she turned a little pale, nevertheless. The mere notion of the possibility of such a man's having access to their own dwelling was not pleasant.

Frank did not answer, but began working away at the other crack. It would not yield, and was evidently fastened in some way on the other side—by a bolt, Frank thought, as it gave way a little when he pressed it at the top and bottom, but kept resolutely firm in the middle, not yielding a hair's breadth.

"Have you such a thing as a gimblet, Mabel, darling?" he asked, on finding all his efforts vain.

"Yes, in Deb's tool-box; good old Deb turned a little bit of a carpenter as well as everything else, for our sake."

Frank hardly waited till her sentence was finished but flew out of the room, and into the kitchen; and in less than three minutes was hard at work, boring a hole through the obstinate bit of deal. It gave him some trouble at first, but the tool once admitted he soon pushed it through up to the very handle. There was no resistance. He withdrew it hastily, and placed his eye at the aperture it had made. After standing there so long, that Mabel began to be a little impatient to know what he was seeing, he turned back to her, and said,

"Just as I thought. There ought to be lath and plaster here, but there is none."

"What is there, then?"

"I cannot tell, beyond a feeble glimmering of light, which there ought not to be!"

"Well, I can't exactly see any harm the light can do. I have heard Dr. Armsdaile say these houses are run up quickly and carelessly, with no proper thickness of wall; so may not that account for the light?"

"No, however thin a wall, if it is a wall at all, it must be impervious to light; besides, there should

be lath and plaster between the deal on this side and on that, granting the partition to be of the very slightest. There is something wrong here, Mabel—very wrong. I must sift this matter to the bottom. I shall go and see this respectable neighbour of yours."

As he spoke, his eyes chanced to fall on the old cabinet, and he changed colour.

Mabel, who was anxiously watching him, asked what was the matter.

"Nothing! except a thought which has just struck me, Mabel. What if this discovery of to-day leads to another—if this mysterious closet had anything to do with the abstraction of that paper!"

"Oh! Frank."

"Nay, my darling! Don't be over-excited about it, I almost wish I had kept the sudden thought—and such it literally was, nothing more—to myself. I do not want to raise false hopes only to extinguish them again; put this fancy of mine out of your head."

"I will try; but it may be true, Frank, and I can't quite forget it. Nay—" as she saw him look distressed, "a little more disappointment won't harm me so very much; besides, I shall have you to help me to bear it."

And she smiled shyly up into his face.

He murmured some words of fondness, adding,

"But I don't want you to bear any more just at present, Mabel; you have had enough, so I will try and end this at once."

And he was going out of the room when Mabel said,

"If you are going to see that man, he is not there—I saw him go out as I was getting the taper for you."

"Ha! I wonder if he heard what was going on, and took himself out of harm's way. I must see him as soon as I can; I won't be too late this time —I'll watch here till he comes back, and go to him that instant."

CHAPTER IV.

WHATEVER the feelings roused in Harry Neville's mind by the emphatic words spoken to him on parting by Sarah—and they were not pleasant or quite comprehensible to himself—they had not the effect of deterring him from visiting and seeking her as usual, and Sarah made no further attempt to separate him from her. One look she gave him on his reappearance the morning after that strange parting—a curious, searching look, which seemed partly to ask, partly to affirm,

"You are determined on your course, then—my warnings might as well have been unspoken."

But that excepted, she made no allusion to the past; he could almost have thought her utterly unheeding and forgetful of it, so very much the same did she behave to him again, her conduct in all ways no whit altered. True, she was moody and fitful, more so than he ever remembered; but that she had been before, and he began to hope her words had had no fuller meaning than a caution against her own wayward nature, no deeper source

than the irritable gloom which seemed to have taken entire possession of her for the time.

"You will not refuse to come to us on Thursday?" he said one day very pleadingly. "Here is a little note of invitation from my mother, specially for you—you alone. We have no party, only young Hood—Charley's suitor, you know; he is stopping with us—no one else; it is simply a family party. My mother said she thought you could not object to that, and hoped you would stay till Saturday at least."

Good Harry! did you not a little vary your excellent mother's words there? It cost you no small amount of trouble, and much wary gratifying on your part of her mother's love and pride in you, before you could induce the Countess to write that note, you know; and what she said was not *exactly* what you now repeat. Possibly you believe yourself, and not without some reason, allowed much license in that way!

He paused a little, while Sarah carelessly tore open the note he handed her, and then said in a low tone,

"Pray make one amongst us just this once—it is my birthday."

"Your birthday is it!" Sarah answered, and the tone was soft for her; she looked at him for a moment with a gentler expression, too, but she

added, "No; I am sorry you should wish it, for it cannot be."

"Nay, don't decide at once. Never mind writing—leave it till to-morrow. Do try and come."

"Now, Mr. Neville," she replied impatiently, "be satisfied. I have told you I am sorry; I would not have said as much to any other being, and, not content, you are urging me troublesomely —uselessly!" and she flung down the note in her hand as she spoke.

Harry was silent. He saw she was sorry, or, at any rate, that she was not vexing him purposely, but he was grievously disappointed nevertheless, and looked so.

Sarah scribbled off a hasty answer, folded, sealed, and handed it to him; all was done so rapidly he had hardly realised what she was about, when the note was put into his hands.

"There. At any rate I need not fail in courtesy to the Countess your mother," she said, and there was a strange tone in her voice as she spoke. "Say what you will for me yourself—there is my answer; delaying till Thursday itself would not vary it, but only show me indifferent to the etiquette and rules of her society to no purpose."

The young man took the note, and as he did so looked sadly into her face, saying,

"I did think you might have made one exception in favour of this day; it will be but a blank one to me without you."

She made no answer, but her brow contracted for a moment, and so well had he learnt the workings of her beautiful face that he was glad she did not speak. To shake her resolve was evidently hopeless, and he had feared his importunity was on the verge of being really distasteful to her. He saw that she was moved by it, however, and not so displeased as he had dreaded.

"You do not go out shooting much this season," she observed presently, as she stood near the window toying with the signet on the paper-knife which she had used in sealing her note. "Are you weary of the sport?—I thought you loved it?"

"Yes, and do still; but there are things I like better."

"Do you remember that card of admission for shooting here you got last year?"

"Very, very well; it was the first time I saw you."

"Ah!" and Sarah's face looked dark—the moodiest look it had ever worn came up upon it. "I had it sent you."

"And surely you do not repent—you look as if you did?"

"Whether I do or not, can make no difference now. It is among those past deeds of one's life beyond recall."

"You had tickets for the ball on the same day."

"My doing again! What a farce it all is, after all, from beginning to end!" and she moved impatiently away and threw the paper-knife on the table; then suddenly coming up to where Harry stood, she said, "You have been here long enough —good-bye."

"Will you ride to-day?"

"Not with you, at any rate."

"To-morrow, then?"

She shook her head, but added with a strange smile,

"On Thursday morning, if you will, though;" and as she passed out of the room, she muttered to herself, "Poor boy, I cannot rob him of one dose of poison on his birthday, since he is so eager for it. Fool!—and what am I?" and she strode along the gallery to her own room with swift, impatient steps.

"Mr. Neville will lunch here to-day, mama," Sarah announced to her mother on the morning of that Thursday.

"Oh, dear! Will there—is there to be a party?" asked poor Mrs. Lockstone in a tone of dismay.

"Really, mama, I have no idea."

"But—but you said Mr. Neville was to lunch here, Sarah?"

"And I repeat the alarming fact, mama."

"Well, then, I——"

"He does not generally travel about with the whole Castle Neville party in his pocket, that I'm aware of," interrupted Sarah impatiently, and the meek, timid woman subsided into resignation and despair.

That Harry Neville attended punctually on Thursday morning for his promised ride need scarcely be said, nor did Sarah keep him waiting long; she appeared in her habit, and Jetty came round the sweep almost at the same instant that he himself rode up to the door. A very fresh, invigorating autumnal morning it was, and a pleasanter ride no two people could well have had. The weather was perfect for the season; the horses in good condition, spirited and eager; the country very lovely, with its last lingering mantle of many-shaded yellow. Harry enjoyed it extremely; the fact that Sarah had herself proposed the expedition being in itself a source of extreme gratification to him. She was more than usually gracious throughout the ride; as they passed through the lodge gates on their return, he expressed his regret that it was over.

Sarah did not answer ; she looked abstracted and preoccupied again, and it was not till he stood by her side, ready to help her dismount, that she said,

"Do you care for lunching here, or would you prefer returning home ?"

Harry's countenance visibly brightened as she spoke ; the privilege had never been offered him before by her, and it made him very happy ; she was making up to him, he thought, for her refusal to be of their party that evening. Sarah watched his face, and over her own there passed a momentary softness as she read the unmistakable pleasure written there.

"You need scarcely ask the question," he said as he followed her in ; "and you would not have asked me if you had not meant I should come."

Luncheon over, Harry lingered on, till at last Sarah again reminded him it was more than time his horse was ordered, if he would not be too late for his home dinner. She waited till the order had been given, which it was with evident reluctance ; and then she drew from her reticule one of the large pocket pencil-cases, at that time only just becoming fashionable.

"I refused to join your party, Harry Neville, on your birthday, but I wish you well notwithstanding —better, perhaps, than I ever wished human being beside—nay, do not misunderstand me—remember

our bargain—as a proof of it, I give you this, if you will have it—though the best proof of all might be my never speaking to you more," she added in a lower and somewhat strange tone of voice, which Harry scarcely noticed, so enraptured was he, not exactly with her gift, but that she should have thought of giving him anything at all.

"If you can sometimes pain," he said, "you know well how to heal—how to give such pleasure that the pain is not worth remembering in comparison, or, rather, is worth enduring doubly, for the sake of such sweet compensation. Thank you—thank you a thousand times! Most precious gift that I have ever yet received," he added with a rapture so unfeigned, it dignified the otherwise somewhat ludicrous expression of it.

Sarah looked on in silence, an expression almost of pain upon her features while he spoke. As he ended she made an effort to recover herself, and, with a smile on her lips, said warningly,

"Take care; do not make me repent my folly by rating it at more than its just value. There is your horse at last; good-bye."

And thus again dismissing him—indeed, it was seldom till she did so dismiss him that Harry Neville ever left the Manor House—she held her hand towards him, and allowing him to retain it for a second, preceded him into the hall, where the

servants were already waiting to open the door for him.

After he had ridden away, Sarah returned into the room where she had been talking with him. A cosy little room it was—the Lees had used it for a breakfast-room occasionally, and Sarah had lately chosen to occupy it a good deal. She sat down in the same chair from whence she had risen to send Harry away, and clasped her hands over her brow; it was a favourite position of hers, and somewhat an original one, as it left all the lower part of her face uncovered. Very stern that looked now, about the mouth and chin, and more than once every beautiful feature was convulsed by some inward spasm, as it seemed, not of physical pain, but of mental doubt. These were new guests to Sarah Lockstone, and she hardly understood or knew how to treat or battle with them.

As she sat thus a servant entered suddenly, startling her exceedingly, for she was completely absorbed in her own thoughts. He observed her start and hesitated. Few cared to cross Sarah Lockstone's mood, and it was not everyone who understood always how to avoid exciting her anger or contempt.

"What is it?" she demanded imperiously and quickly.

"A man, madam; he—he says he wants to see you."

"What man?—I expect no one."

"No, madam, and we have tried to send him away, but he won't go; he will have it you would see him if we came to you."

"Who is he, I ask you?" she again questioned impatiently.

"I don't know, madam, in the least; none of us do, but he says he's walked all the way from Merestown to speak to you, and speak to you he will."

Sarah thought for a moment, then said quietly,

"Send him in."

And the astonished servant retired quickly, and not many moments after returned, ushering in no than Tony Hicks.

Tony came in, looking full of importance, and by no means abashed at the luxurious appliances to comfort and ease of the chamber in which he found himself; nor even at the presence of Sarah herself, till she transfixed him with her bright cold eyes. One glance was enough. He stopped short in the hasty advance he was making towards her; his shambling feet, suspended in their farther progress, remained awkwardly fixed in the position in which they were when her look arrested him; his eyes fell, his head drooped, and he remained fumbling with the

buttons of his coat, which, although no longer shabby and ragged, had more stains and grease about it than by any means suited a visitor at Lee Manor.

When Sarah considered she had thoroughly abashed him, she asked, in her hardest, most supercilious tone of voice, what he wanted.

Tony looked up again as she spoke, and a flash of something like anger darted from his eyes as he answered, more resolutely than she had expected,

"Business of yours, not my own, brought me; but if I'm to be treated like this, it'll be long enough before I tramp all the way here to tell you of it, let what will happen."

"It would have been far better had you left it alone now, I imagine. However, let me hear what it is."

Tony immediately entered on a long detail of the circumstances which had induced his visit. Sarah listened closely, and every now and then a smile broke over her face as she looked at him with undisguised contempt. She never interrupted him from beginning to end, but when he had finished, she looked full at him once again, and asked, coldly,

"And for this you intruded yourself here, Tony Hicks?"

"Intrude!" exclaimed the man, indignantly—

"I came for your good; it wouldn't hurt me."

"Nor me," returned Sarah, with a calmness which evidently took Tony considerably aback.

He stared at her in blank amazement; she was so different from her father, Stephen Lockstone, there was no knowing how to act with her. She enjoyed his confused bewilderment in silence for some time, and then said,

"Tony Hicks, you have been useful to me in some ways, but you had best not presume on this. You have been well paid for what you have done, and there is no debt between us."

"I—I didn't say there was; I thought you'd like to know that," stammered Tony.

"You thought I was made of the same craven stuff as yourself and others," she answered, impatiently. "You are mistaken. I count the cost of what it pleases me to do beforehand, and abide it, whatever it may be."

"I did it for the best," muttered Tony, sullenly.

"I believe you did, or you would not stand where you are much longer," Sarah returned, significantly; "but understand, if you please, my orders admit of no departure from them, no matter what your private judgment may suggest on accidental circumstances. I bid you never set foot within these gates. You have disobeyed me, because you presumed to think. No agent of

mine must allow himself that indulgence. You should obey to the letter your commands. If anything should arise where a deviation from them might have been better, that is my risk. I am willing to incur it, and no blame would attach to you. Be good enough to understand this for the future, if we have any more dealings together."

"Anyhow, you may as well tell me what to say," returned Tony, doggedly.

Sarah fixed her eyes on him with a curious expression, and at last said,

"I should not have imagined Tony Hicks at a loss in such a case. If you really are so, remember your general instructions, the old bargain, and act up to it."

"It's so long ago, and I never expected——"

"Pshaw!—you are making useless, unnecessary excuses!" she answered, impatiently. "I tell you again, act on your orders, keep to them, and you will go right."

"I am to say——"

"Do you expect me to teach you your own trade?" Sarah asked, imperiously, and rising as she spoke.

"You might help me to what would be best."

"How long has Tony Hicks been at a loss for lies?" she said, contemptuously. "Once more,

act on your orders—nothing has changed them; and now go, and take care how you enter these doors again without express permission."

She rang the bell as she spoke, and the crest-fallen Tony slunk off with a very evil, sullen look upon his face. It was hard, certainly, and a better man than Tony Hicks might have felt it so. For once in his life he had acted disinterestedly, with absolute sincerity, and a single eye to the interests of others—his own interest being, of course, mixed up with them—and what was his reward? Why, he had been rated for coming, bidden to mind his orders like any common servant, told to beware how he disobeyed them in future, and sent off without so much as a glass of ale.

That last injury, though it might have seemed the least, filled up the brimming cup of the man's wrath to overflowing, and he gnashed his teeth with impotent rage. Why shouldn't he tell all he knew?—what need he care? They might do as they could, and he—ah! that thought was sobering. It stemmed the current of his wrath. Why was it Sarah Lockstone always made him feel so helpless, so dependent?—always reminding him he was in the same boat to sink or swim with them? It was not so with his old master. He had a hold over him, and as this thought occurred to him, Tony

Hicks raised his eyes, and saw Stephen Lockstone approaching.

Meanwhile, Sarah was pacing up and down the room where Tony had left her with angry, impatient steps, an expression on her face which was a strange one there. The cold, supercilious, self-depending look was there no longer—but agitation and uncertainty, emotions not often visible on her beautiful face. She stopped, and stamped her foot impatiently; and as she did so, it kicked something lying beneath the table. She stooped down and picked it up—a riding-glove of Harry Neville's, dropped by him in the absorbing interest of receiving that pencil from her as his birthday gift. Yes, no doubt that was it, she thought, as she gazed on the glove, with the peculiar bend of every finger impressed upon the leather, and showing very plainly to those who knew the hand who was in the habit of wearing it.

And as the image of Harry Neville rose up before her, Sarah stamped her foot again, and dropping the glove as though it had bitten her, muttered,

"Am I turning a soft fool? I cannot understand myself—I cannot trust myself. Why did I not open it at once? Why did I not act at once, and not subject myself to these weak vacillations? It is not too late now. Too late!" and the old smile

stole over her face. "No, not too late for me! Shall I put it at once and for ever out of my own power?" And as she asked herself this question, she turned to the window, and from it beheld the meeting of her father and Tony Hicks.

She watched it with intense interest. All the vague doubt had disappeared from her face now—and she looked at the two men with a glance that seemed to penetrate into their very souls. They did not look badly matched, and a flash of impotent rage lighted Sarah's eyes as she thought so. True, her father was well dressed, and his features finely shaped, but he had a down look, a timid sort of cringing, even, towards Tony Hicks, which exasperated Sarah beyond measure as she saw it, and it was some moments before her eyes settled down again into their ordinary gaze of cool contempt.

The interview was not a very long one, but, to Tony, it was evidently more satisfactory than that with herself had been; as she could tell from the different way in which he carried himself after parting with Stephen Lockstone. The latter came slowly on towards the house, a greater pallor over his features, a more than commonly depressed look on his face. Sarah waited impatiently till she heard him come in, and, as she anticipated, go to his study. She followed on the instant, and ignor-

ing the ceremony of knocking, entered at once. He was already sitting in his great chair, in the dejected attitude she knew so well, and despised so intensely.

"You do not favour me by your ordinary melodramatic start, even, sir, I observe," Sarah began, scoffingly. "Did Tony Hicks take all power for it out of you?"

Her father looked up, and would have scowled, had he dared, as he said,

"The man came to see you, he said."

"Did he?" and the offence was registered against Tony. "I never gave him orders to tell you that." But she went on with perfect calmness, "Perhaps he also told you I object to his coming here, on any pretence whatever. You may be proud of his acquaintance—I am not."

"Your knowing him was none of my doing," Stephen Lockstone answered, sharply, too, considering to whom he spoke; but he fondly hoped he should have the advantage in this encounter, at any rate.

"Indeed! Will you undertake to declare that if you had not known this man, I should?" and she fixed her eyes coldly, scrutinizingly on him.

He writhed in his chair. Did ever another being than this daughter think of such sharp questions and answers!

"You don't know many of those I have to see

on business, Sarah, and have no need to do so," he replied meekly.

"Spare yourself all the trouble of colouring facts we both know equally well, sir. What I wish to know now is, why this man should be kept as a sort of hanger-on in the neighbourhood? He will become a nuisance."

A nuisance! StephenLockstone groaned, almost audibly. Tony Hicks had long been far more than a nuisance to him. One of the two curses of his existence, which he thought, once removed, he should be happy. Perhaps he might, but he probably would have had to administer a strong opiate to his conscience first.

Sarah watched the effect of her words, partly guessing what was passing within her father's harassed mind, and even enjoying his confusion. As he remained silent, she began again—

"Why not send him away altogether?"

"He will stop. He says it is his native town, and he likes it."

"Sentimental! A fitting reason for such as Tony, assuredly, but a false one. He stops here to be a sort of spy on you, depend upon it."

Again the unhappy, tortured man groaned. Why should she always put into such hard words, and confirm so cruelly the truths he himself suspected, but strove to ignore.

"Make his leaving the place a condition of what you do for him."

"I can't, Sarah—I can't!" and Stephen Lockstone, as he gasped out the words, looked fearfully round, as if in terror lest the walls might hear and repeat them.

"Folly!" Sarah answered, contemptuously. "You not only can, but ought. He would not risk the loss of your gifts, by persisting in a course obnoxious to you, if you were man enough to be firm."

"He—he might do more!" whispered her father, hoarsely, as if the words were forced from him in spite of himself.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders contemptuously, impatiently.

"What shadows frighten you!" she said, scornfully. "He could gain nothing by anything he has power to say, and he knows it."

Stephen Lockstone looked eagerly, sharply up, but he did not answer, and Sarah, too, paused longer than usual. The debate begun in the other room was continuing itself now in her own mind, but she could not come to a resolve. She must think more on it yet, quietly, alone. She despised herself for not deciding there and then, but, wrestle as she might, she could not do it. Presently she spoke again.

"His simple word would carry no weight with it. He is not sure of the one fact that carries all the importance with it. Be firm with him, and you would succeed."

Her father listened to her as she thus spoke with opened eyes and face full of a fearful astonishment.

"How—what do you——" he stammered.

"No matter as to me, or what I know or do not know," she replied sternly. "Have I proved right before?"

Stephen Lockstone could not deny that she had, more often than he cared to own. Oh! why, why was not she a boy, instead of this strange mysterious girl, the torture of his life?

"Act on what I advise you now, then. Saturday is market-day; you will be in Merestown, and, of course, at the old office you still cling to so absurdly. Send for the man; make him an offer, as liberal a one as you choose, but be steadfast in keeping to your terms. He will accept them."

And Stephen Lockstone thought he would. He was growing desperate, and beginning to feel that anything would be better than the present state of things. Only he would not send for him—he would go to see him. He had had enough of those interviews in the old office, where Tony was as a nightmare he could not shake off. He would go to his

own little house, and then he could end the interview as soon as he chose. He would beard the lion in his own den.

CHAPTER V.

"THE man is never coming back, I think," Frank Marsden said, after he had kept up a long watch at the window of No. 5, Newman's Buildings.

"Let me come now, and you go and sit by papa," Mabel answered, as she came across from the other side of the room. "He is getting quite impatient at your not coming to look over the paper with him."

"Sign to me, then, the moment you see the creature at the gate," Frank replied, as he rather unwillingly resigned his post to Mabel, and joined Mr. Lee.

It was a long watch they had kept up, Frank chiefly; indeed, it was only for dinner that he had really left his station, and he would not have done so then but that Deborah undertook so to manage her comings and goings that no entrance at the next door should escape her vigilance, while the poor invalid would have been hard to pacify indeed had Frank not been in his accustomed seat at

table. As it was, he had more than once asked in very troubled tones,

"What do you stand there for, Frank? Come and sit down; I want you. What can you stay there for?" And the young man's prompt "I am looking for a person I wish to see, sir—I will come as soon as I can," failed to content him for many minutes together.

Looking over the paper that had been already looked at many times before, going over the same ground and repeating very much the same words, was no small trial of patience to Frank just now, eager as he was to get to the bottom of the history of that mysterious slit; but he submitted to it, and with so good a grace as won many a smile from Mabel, and completely occupied and charmed the poor old man, who quite believed his young favourite as interested as himself in the feeble iterations of facts long ago discussed, and his own oft-repeated surmises upon them.

At last, just as it was growing dusk, a whispered "Frank" from Mabel rewarded his patient endurance.

He started up with a hasty "Excuse me a moment, my dear sir," and crossed to where she sat, looking into the garden of No. 4. Yes, there he was at last!—there was no mistaking Tony Hicks, as he shambled up the path, muttering, as it ap-

peared, to himself, and looking in no very amiable mood.

Frank hardly allowed him time to open his own door before he stood at it, still ajar as it was, knocking very determinedly for admission.

Tony took his time to answer, nevertheless; but at last his bloated, disgusting face peered round the edge of the door as he cautiously opened it some two inches farther. Frank instantly planted his foot within.

"I have a word or two to say to you, Mr.——" and he hesitated; he had no idea of the man's name.

"Hicks—Mr. Anthony Hicks is my name, and I'm not ashamed of it," responded that worthy, somewhat surlily.

"And mine is Marsden," Frank answered, resolutely advancing as he did so; "a friend of your next neighbour's, Mr. Hicks, and I am come to speak to you on a rather curious matter. I shall be glad if you will allow me to step into your sitting-room."

There was no help for it, that was quite clear to Tony; Frank was already in the passage, there was nothing for it but to open the room-door with as good a grace as might be.

He did so. It was a counterpart of the Lees', in size, height, placement of the stove, door, win-

dow, &c., except that these were all exactly reversed, the chimneys of the two rooms being back to back. The same, and yet how different! As Frank glanced rapidly but accurately round, he could hardly believe the two rooms were really such complete twins. This bare, comfortless, staring square box—with its gaudy carpet, bran-new as it looked, yet already stained here and there with beer or spirits, and burnt with tobacco ashes; the hard, horsehair sofa, and six chairs to match; the dirty glass and broken pipe on the deal table, the black bottle, and a tinder-box on the mantelshelf, in affectionate proximity to a china shepherdess very much out of proportion, the only attempt at ornament of any sort in the room—looked the complete antipodes of its next-door brother, simple and inexpensively adorned as that was. Such is the wide difference appliances make! —so much do refinement and taste tell where they exist, even in such comparatively unimportant matters as the arrangement of a sitting-room.

Frank had noted the difference in a moment, and then bent his whole attention on endeavouring to discover some sign of the door of communication he suspected to exist. That was difficult, however; the paper, though comparatively newly hung, was torn in several places all round, but more particularly where the door, if it existed at all, would be.

Tony Hicks, while ostensibly engaged in setting a chair for his visitor, was carefully, though furtively, scrutinizing his proceedings from under his bent brows, and the looks bestowed by Frank on that particular side of the room were by no means lost on him.

"Take a seat," he said, not over civilly, as he placed the chair exactly with its back to the point on which the young man's eyes were fixed.

"Thank you," replied the latter, quietly turning the seat as he took it directly round.

Tony scowled, but said nothing. Frank had now fixed his eyes on himself, and the scrutiny was by no means pleasant to him. He fidgeted and moved about the room, and finally, like a wild beast brought to bay, turned round and asked bluntly,

"What is it you want, young sir?"

"Only the truth," replied Frank slowly, and with some emphasis.

Tony fidgeted again, but did not answer.

"I only want to know," continued Frank, keeping his eyes fixed on the man as he spoke, "whether or no you have a closet in this room, corresponding to the one at the next house."

"Not that I know of. I've not been here long," answered Tony, so hastily, it was quite evident to Frank he had not been unprepared for some such question.

"Will you allow me to look?"

"There is nothing to look at, young sir, I tell you, and one doesn't like strangers poking about one's house."

"I shall do you no mischief; if you will, you can make the examination yourself, and I will look on—but—I am resolved to ascertain what I wish to know, and if you refuse to assist me in it, I shall apply to the landlord, and possibly to the constables of the town."

He watched Tony narrowly as he spoke; but the man's face betrayed no symptom whatever of alarm, and he answered doggedly,

"I can't see any call you have, sir, to look over another man's house; but whether there's a closet or not, is no matter to me. I've told you I've never used any, or seen one."

"My good man," Frank replied, now changing his tactics, "I am not accusing you of possessing or not possessing one. I tell you openly I want to know if there is such a thing; I am resolved to ascertain it. I have very good reasons of my own for desiring this, let me tell you, but I have no desire to quarrel with you about it. Why should I? It can be no matter to you, as you say, whether there is or is not this closet, so it can be equally no matter to you my finding it or not, but it may be of more interest to you that I should

look for it quietly with your help, than have to set other people to work. If you put no hindrances in my way, I will make it worth your while. What do you say?"

Tony did not answer for a few minutes. He was thinking—in fact, he was weighing certain chances one against the other. At length he made up his mind, and said, not over-willingly, however,

"Look, if you will; but you'd best pay me beforehand; it's the rummest sort of thing I ever knew."

"Nay," returned Frank, "I will not pay before you have earned your wages—that would hardly be fair for me—as I think even you will allow; but when my examination is over I pledge my word to give you a guinea on the spot, for any trouble I may cause you. Is it a bargain?"

Tony grumbled out something of an assent, and Frank instantly set to work. He had no difficulty in removing the paper from where he supposed the closet door to be; it appeared to him to have been but recently re-papered, and there were many slits and ragged pieces, which had evidently been very roughly torn away, but more carefully replaced. By-and-bye he could trace the slit, and as he rapped against that part of the wall it sounded hollow. He took out his knife again, and began inserting it.

"Holloa," said Tony, who had been hitherto watching his proceedings, silent, though sullen, "if you're going to do much more damage, I don't see how your paltry guinea's to pay me for it."

"Be satisfied, you shall be no loser, and have your guinea into the bargain," returned Frank, somewhat contemptuously.

He had just discovered that what he had supposed to be a real door, like the one on the other side, was simply a bit of canvas, fastened to cross way bits of deal, in the way paperers batten uneven surfaces; and, as it appeared to him, this contrivance was of no very distant date.

He gave a vigorous pull; the partition yielded, and came down into the room with a crash, bringing a cloud of dust and rubbish along with it.

For a few seconds the dust was so blinding, he stepped back, and, as he did so, he looked hard at Tony. He fancied the latter changed countenance a little; but if so, he quickly recovered himself, and again muttered something about the injury done to his things, and pulling about other people's property for whims.

Frank vouchsafed no answer this time, and the dust having cleared off a little, advanced to the aperture left by the false bit of fallen wall. It covered a far smaller surface than that of the closet door in the Lees' room, not being much more than four

feet high by three wide; but the hollow space within was almost equal in height and width to the closet there, and was of a broken, uneven surface, denoting that it had been hastily cleared out. There was no smooth shaven deal, no planed sides, nothing but bits of lath and rubbish—except where the back of the closet belonging to the Lees' room ought to have been! That was, plainly enough, only deal, with the bolt in the middle, which had resisted Frank's efforts to open it that morning. In short, there was no closet at all, and so far Tony Hicks spoke truly; but the wall had evidently been broken through, and the temporary partition made to gain admission into the other house.

It was as clear as daylight, and Frank could hardly restrain his rage and impatience within bounds, as, standing within the aperture, he could plainly hear the tones of Mabel's gentle voice, and even, by putting his ear to the opening of the door, distinguish her words.

He came out of the hole—for it could truly be called nothing else—and turned the full force of his concentrated rage on Tony, who stood quietly at some little distance from the fallen door, exactly in the same position Frank had seen him last, somewhat sullen, apparently, but on the whole with an air of genuine or very well assumed indifference.

The young man fixed his angry eyes upon him, and if looks could have annihilated Tony, he would not have stood thus much longer. But they seemed to have no effect on him whatever; and on second thoughts, Frank restrained his rage, not without difficulty, and merely asked, in a low tone, which hardly betrayed the passion at work within,

"What explanation are you prepared to give me of that, if you please, Mr. Hicks?"

"Of what—that bit of canvas, and all this dust and to do?—well, I should say it was rather my place to ask that of you, sir."

And Tony succeeded, by a desperate effort, in assuming the injured look he desired.

"I ask you once more, and I warn you I am a lawyer," Frank returned, and not speaking quite so calmly this time, "what you have to say for yourself for having feloniously cut a secret passage into another man's house?"

"Oh! as to that, I can't help what I know nothing about it. Is there a way?"

And he looked up for a moment with a well-assumed expression of innocence.

"You knew it as well—better than I do," young Marsden replied impatiently; "what you have to do now is to explain how it came there."

"And how the devil am I to do that?" echoed Tony, with well simulated indignation. "I've told

you I know nothing about it, and I tell you so again. I've never put foot into yonder house, and don't want to neither."

There was genuine truth in the last few words. Frank felt it and paused. It was quite evident he could get nothing out of him he did not choose to communicate. It was very difficult to sift the truth from the falsehood of all he said. He knew nothing about him, and was working in the dark.

"Look you," he said sharply, "I promised you a guinea, and the repairing of any damage I might do; I will be as good as my word, but let me see that wall built up and that canvas door taken away before we are a day older—then the money shall be yours. Can you get any one to attend to it to-night?"

"I can't say. I might, if I could say you weren't particular what you paid," answered Tony cunningly.

"Say so, then, and let me find it all right and fast before noon to-morrow." And flinging his guinea on the table, Frank hastened out of the house.

He was received in the next with a bewailment of his absence from Mr. Lee, which told very plainly there was little chance of his being soon released from attendance on the poor imbecile, now he had returned; and for awhile Frank gave him as

much of his attention as he could command, and that was very little, as his thoughts were busy in the mystery of the extraordinary communication between the two houses; but it contented the old man, while Mabel ever and anon stole an anxious look of inquiry to Frank's face, which it was impossible to answer.

It was a severe trial of patience, but he bore it well, till at last Mrs. Lee's entrance with a dish of late peaches in her hand, which she had received from Deborah as she came downstairs, procured him a diversion. The Ravenshaws had sent them over expressly for him, and this news, with the delight of examining, admiring, and finally eating one or two of them, happily engaged her husband for some time.

Frank seized the opportunity.

"Mabel has not been out all day, my dear ma'am —do you think a little walk in the gloaming will hurt her, and can you spare us for a quarter of an hour?"

Mrs. Lee willingly assented. Mabel was ready in three minutes, and in five they were getting well clear of Newman's Buildings.

"Well?" Mabel exclaimed, as they passed the last house, and Frank somewhat lessened the long strides he had been taking.

He replied to the questioning monosyllable by

giving her an accurate account of his interview with their unprepossessing neighbour. Mabel shuddered at the idea of this secret passage between the houses, existing all unknown to them, for an unknown length of time.

"How thankful I am papa never discovered it, and that no one ever came upon us suddenly. Oh! Frank, it is not pleasant to think that man or his associates may have been walking about our room at night, when we were quite unconscious of it. Poor papa! When he said the cabinet had been moved, it might not have been altogether fancy, as we used to think."

"No, that cabinet was, I have very little doubt, the object of this extraordinary proceeding; but the question now is, how to set about exposing the whole matter—though, alas! Mabel, this, too, will no doubt be too late."

"What shall you do?"

"Discover who this Tony Hicks is, in the first place—I wish I had inquired about him before; you know what a horror I had of him, my darling, at the very first."

"Yes," and Mabel could not help laughing a little at the recollection of Frank's antipathy to the man at first sight. "Do you think he did it?"

"Made the opening? I can't quite make up

my mind. There is something about him that puzzles me. When I find out who he is, I shall be better able to judge what motives may influence him."

"The cabinet, or anything that was in it, could be of no importance to him, one should suppose."

"No, not personally. He is probably the agent for others, and a very unscrupulous one, if I may judge by his look. Mabel, I am not going to leave your house to-night; I shall make interest with Deborah, and get a shake-down in the parlour, after you are all gone to bed. I could not rest with the knowledge of that horrible door of communication still open."

"Dear Frank, think how many nights for weeks and months, probably, it has been so, and we all safe."

"I don't like to think of it, my dear Mabel, at all, and this is the last night it shall remain so—of that I am thoroughly determined. Not only on the other side, but on yours, shall an effectual barricade be put up to-morrow morning."

"This man Hicks did not seem to object to that at all?"

"No, the object for which it was made is attained, there can be very little doubt of that; indeed, the accumulated dust and dirt proved the passage had not been used for some time; still, I

shall feel far more comfortable when I am certain it is made unavailable."

"He denied all knowledge of it, do you not say?—could it have been done before he came into the house?"

"I think not. Nearly, if not quite all he said, was false. Of that I am tolerably certain. What was, and what was not, it was very difficult to determine; but he was too indifferent to my discovery of the opening to be in any danger himself from it, I fancy. My impression is, whether he made the opening or not, he was not the acting party in abstracting that paper."

"That paper!—oh! if he should know who took it!"

"He will not say, my dear, unless the pressure from without is greater than I fear we can have any means of making it. And he may not know. Indeed, I am inclined to think him altogether ignorant as to how much may depend on sifting this affair to the bottom. And truly, as to that, we are as ignorant as he is; only the person or persons concerned in stealing that paper really know anything of its importance. That may be less than nothing, or it may be very great, and I am more inclined than ever to believe the latter. To-morrow I hope to be in a better position for judging how much or how little there may be for us to

know, and if any object remains to be gained by the discovery except detection," added Frank, sadly.

Mabel knew perfectly well that he was thinking of "too late" once more, and meant that it was most probable, if the paper were of any consequence to them, it had long ago been destroyed. She only asked,

"What will you do first?"

"Find out who this man is, this Hicks, if that is really his name, for we don't even know that yet. I almost wonder he did not refuse to let me examine his room. He might have done so, as he very well knew, and a little delay might have enabled him to have so concealed what had been done, that discovery would have been very difficult. My impression is that he must think himself perfectly safe; and as to anything else, his cupidity carried the day. Or he may know it will prove impossible to us to go farther than we have already."

"To find out anything more?"

"Yes, my darling. Ah! Mabel, I am longing for to-morrow, that I may at least begin to do something. I hope, and yet I fear. Much may hang on this. I should have been better satisfied, I think, if this man Hicks had raised more difficulties to my inspection. And now I suppose we must go back," and he sighed.

Not Mrs. Lee herself was more alive to the incongruity of Mabel Lee walking alone in Merestown suburbs with him—Frank Marsden—"her young man," in the twilight, than he was himself; but what could they do? There was no extensive park, no beautiful garden or secluded shrubbery, to wander in near Newman's Buildings; there was not even a second sitting-room, and it was bad for Mabel to be immured all day, like a caged bird, in the single one they possessed; and he must exchange a word or two in private with her—his promised wife—sometimes.

CHAPTER VI.

FRANK was quite right. Tony Hicks did know perfectly well what he was about when he allowed the young man to investigate the wall of his sitting-room, on the understanding that he was to pocket a guinea for the accorded permission.

Many and many a long month ago Tony Hicks had paid Rachel that much-desired visit in the old house in the High Street. He appeared at the door punctually on the evening, and at the hour that elderly damsel had been pleased to appoint, was graciously admitted, and sat down with his old love to a very comfortable, but, to his spirit-craving palate, very insipid meal of a substantial tea.

Very different were the thoughts and feelings of the two beings thus brought again into close juxtaposition after so many years. The memory of those far-away times was strong upon the lone woman, the one exciting romance in whose dreary, monotonous life it had been. The image of that

faithful but despised suitor, the honest, homely Joel, now lying cold in his lonely, forgotten grave, returned vividly to her mind. She saw the earnest sincerity in his face with very different eyes now, in her imagination, to those with which she had looked on it then, when she might have understood and rewarded it better, and a tear of regret, perhaps of repentance, forced its way to her eyes as the consciousness of how ill she had requited his true affection came more and more forcibly upon her.

Then she thought of that other man, the smart young clerk, with his jaunty air, careless freedom of manners, good clothes, and so like a gentleman—to her eyes, at least—for he was good-looking then. He had black, curly hair—how he used to make it shine sometimes, too—and rosy cheeks, and black eyes, and such whiskers! Poor Joel never had much whisker to speak of, poor lad! How vexed he used to be when she laughed at him about them. And then her mind once more reverted to Joel, to jump back again with a plunge to Tony—not Tony as he sat now before her, eating his buttered toast and bacon and eggs with some relish, but making very wry faces at the hot tea, whenever he put the cup to his mouth and attempted to drink any. No, it was Tony when he could drink tea, when he would slip round from the office the back way, and

run down the kitchen stairs, whistling softly, as a signal to her to come and meet him, or, if she was alone in the kitchen, to bid him come in; then—— what jokes he did make in those days!—at any rate, she supposed so—for she was always kept on the giggle, she knew, do what she would. The compliments, too, the fine things he said to her, and the kisses—they weren't just like poor Joel's, though; she could tell that now, though she didn't mind it then. Ah! she was a great fool; but Tony would have made a handsome husband, as well as a fine gentleman for her in those days, for all that. And waking from her dream of the past with a sigh and a start, Rachel looked at the man as he sat opposite to her, and could hardly believe he ever could have been good-looking or smart, or even the same Tony of those days, so disgusting a figure did he look now, as he sat with the full light of the candle on his sinister face, now glancing askance from under his eyebrows at her, now looking curiously round the room, as though mentally appraising its contents, while his pimpled forehead and cheeks, and purple nose, looked yet more hideous, sitting there with his hat off, than when only seen in the street.

Tony, too, had been thinking of old times. He had nearly chuckled aloud at the memory of how he had done that sneaking lubber, Joel, out of all

chance of his kinswoman's affection; how Rachel had loved him; how easily he might have married her, if he had liked, or taken her off with him unmarried, for that matter. What a good thing he didn't! She had been living here under old Lockstone all these years, taking capital wages, no doubt, and, equally without doubt, doing nothing but save; it might be worth his while to make advances to her now in real earnest. He must marry her now, however, and she'd be rather a troublesome tie just at first; but he'd soon bring her into order—and, after all, perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing, now, to have somebody to keep things comfortable and tidy at home, and be ready to cosset and take care of him when he went there. So he'd set about it at once, and, to please her, swallow that washy tea.

Rachel happened to raise her eyes and fix them on him as he did so, and a grim smile stole over her face.

"You're not used to anything quite so mild as tea now, I take it?" she observed.

"Well—hem!—abroad, you know, my dear Rachel, coffee is the thing; and it's many years now, Rachel, since you gave me a cup of tea. I have not been used to much since, I confess. I daresay I shouldn't have liked it if I had," and he endeavoured to look and speak sentimentally.

"I daresay you wouldn't," Rachel answered, bluntly, and it was not an encouraging tone.

"The bacon is done to a turn," he went on, presently, trying to hit on a subject at once safe and flattering. "Your hand's not out, Rachel; as good a cook as ever, I'll answer for it!" and he sighed and grinned.

If, to get Rachel's savings, he must have a wife, it was a desirable thing she should be a good cook. His appetite wasn't what it was, and little appetising dainties, done to perfection, would be just the thing for him.

"You can eat that, then," Rachel answered, after a pause, during which she was observing him narrowly. As he passed his cup, rather ruefully, to be re-filled, she added, "I never drink anything but tea, or perhaps coffee, myself—nothing stronger, at any rate. I get on better without it. If you'd take my advice, you'd do the same. What do you say?" and she looked at him with a very mischievous twinkle in her still fine dark eyes.

"Well, really now," stammered the unlucky Tony, "I've no doubt it would be an excellent thing; I've never thought about it. You see, Rachel, I hadn't you to put it into my head; and when one lives the sort of life I've been obliged to lead, why, you see, some little wine or spirit, or

something, is a thing no one can very well do without."

"You couldn't, you drunken sot!" thought Rachel contemptuously to herself; and as she again watched the wry face with which he attacked his second cup, her compassion and hospitality got the better of her desire to plague her once faithless lover.

She got up, and quietly fetched a glass and a black bottle, and put them at Tony's elbow, saying,

"There, I'd rather not see folks look as if I was giving them poison to drink when they're swallowing my good bohea, so you'd better mix yourself a glass of that hot; but mind ye, Tony Hicks, you shan't have more than's good for you here, so mind that."

Rachel spoke emphatically, and her look even more than her words expressed her resolution on this point. Tony saw she distrusted him—that he was now regarded by her as a confirmed drunkard, and he would have given something for resolution to withstand the present temptation of that black bottle close to his elbow. Now, or never, was the time to prove he could be abstemious—nay, by a strong exercise of his will, refrain altogether. But it would not do; the habits of indulgence for a life were too strong on him, and he soon furtive-

ly mixed himself a glass of the excellent cordial she had placed within his reach. He would only take one, but it proved so remarkably good that he felt another must follow, if only to prove his appreciation of the quality of Rachel's strong liquors. Another and another followed that, till Rachel quietly took the bottle away, and locked it up in her cupboard again, observing,

"You've seasoned your head well, Tony—a deal too well, to my thinking; but that stuff's pure and strong, and you shan't have any more to-night."

But he did another night, and so eager was he to carry on his courtship, that rarely would Rachel have been left to the solitude which had now, from the custom of long years, grown familiar—almost dear to her—had she not herself limited his visits to once, or, at the most, twice a week. Why she suffered these, she would have been puzzled to explain, even to herself. She no longer cared for Tony; she despised him. He was not a particularly amusing companion—rather the reverse when, as was the case in her presence, there was any restraint upon him. He tried to be insinuating, to induce her belief in his continued regard for her; but she knew perfectly well that he valued the contents of her black bottle a thousand times more than he did herself, and now

and then she plainly told him so. Yet still he came, and still she suffered his presence, possibly because he seemed a link between the dull, dreary days of the present and those of her youth. The brightest, most interesting period of her life to Rachel, trial-beset and storm-troubled as it had been.

One day Sarah Lockstone stood at the window of the old room in the High Street, when she witnessed one of the often-recurring interviews between Tony and Rachel. He was endeavouring to invite himself to tea with her; and Rachel was resolutely declining the honour. Sarah caught some of the words of the dispute, which greatly entertained her. When Rachel almost shut the door leading into the kitchen in Tony's face, and herself re-entered it, Sarah summoned her, and questioned her again as to the man's movements—where he lived, and whether he intended to stay in Merestown.

"I suppose so, for the present, at any rate, since he's taken a house this last week."

"Taken a house, meaning you to share it with him, Rachel, I suspect!" answered Sarah, smiling.

Rachel tossed up her head, and smoothed down her apron.

"What I mean and what he means may be different, Miss Sarah, and I rather wonder you

don't see it so," she replied, rather sharply.

"I never said I did not, Rachel," and Sarah answered less haughtily than usual. "Does Tony always see you when he comes to my father?"

"Not he; he tries to do so most times, but I'm as wide-awake as he now, though I wasn't once. My bit of money's quite safe in the savings' bank, and I mean to keep it there. I didn't work hard for it, and hoard it all these years, to see it go in a fortnight in gin and water, whatever Tony may fancy."

"No, Rachel; I'm sure I should be sorry to think you could be so foolish as to listen to him for a moment. Where's his house?" she added, abruptly.

"In those new places out of the town—something Buildings, he calls them."

Sarah gave a hardly-perceptible start.

"Newman's Buildings, is it?"

"I think it is, but he was getting so maundering when he began to talk of it, that I scarce heard the name rightly."

"I should like to see this old flame of yours, Rachel. Contrive to have him here on Tuesday—I will come in by three o'clock."

So Sarah and Tony were duly introduced to each other, and the latter felt, before he had been five minutes under the scrutinizing eyes of

Stephen Lockstone's daughter, that he had met one whom he could neither bully nor frighten, whatever airs he might assume in her presence, and that she had some object to gain in thus seeking his acquaintance—something to be done which he could be useful in, as cunning Tony at once surmised.

Sarah did not leave him long in doubt. Having cross-questioned him as to the exact position of his newly-engaged house in Newman's Buildings, she expressed a curiosity to inspect it, and appointed the next day for her visit.

"Rachel will come with me," she observed, with a malicious glance towards that individual. "You will not object to receiving two guests instead of one, Mr. Hicks? Very well, then. So soon as my father has left his office—you were an old clerk of his, I believe—" Tony bowed—"and know his habits—we shall start for your house."

The visit was paid. To Sarah it was a perfectly satisfactory one. She found the house as convenient as she had hoped for converting into a watch-tower, whence to observe the manner of life of the poor Lees, which had of late become an object of the greatest interest to her, and her original opinion of Tony was confirmed—that for money he would do anything that was not against his own interests.

She soon gathered from him how things stood between him and her father—all she did not already know, that is; and she herself bespoke his services in keeping her informed of anything especial happening either in the house of his neighbours or with her father. That first visit was soon followed by another. The family of the Lees—the ousted possessors of the Manor—had a strange fascination for her; she took a unique sort of pleasure in noting their ways in their changed estate; why, she herself would have been puzzled to tell, but it was so. Moreover, there was a mystery, and she knew it—a mystery yet unsolved, concerning the losing and winning of the Manor, and it was the object of her life to discover this, if it were possible.

The desire grew as she partly satisfied it, however meagrely, till it became the passion of her existence. Moreover, fortune favoured her in some ways; she more than once caught scraps of conversation between Frank and Mabel. Long ago, too, an idea had occurred to her own astute mind respecting that cabinet, and the imbecile old man's anxiety concerning it, which subsequent watchings and observation tended sensibly to confirm. She laughed within herself the old bitter, scoffing laugh, as she thought how near accident had brought her to the discovery which her anxious father—the crafty Stephen Lockstone—the poor Lees in

their ignorant resignation, and Frank Marsden in his hopeless hauling over of papers, would each and all give so much to make. Chance and fortune had so far favoured her. She would not lose their gift through cowardice, or show herself unworthy of it by a false, absurd squeamishness in conduct—hanging back in what, after all, was but a trifle.

"Tony," she said one day, the next after her reflections had been made and her resolve taken—"Tony, there is a closet in the Lees' room *here*," and she touched the wall with the parasol she held in her hand. "I should like to look into that closet. Let me do so to-morrow."

"But, Miss Lockstone, how am I——" began Tony in dismay, when one of Sarah's looks brought him to an abrupt pause.

"I am neither carpenter nor mason to tell you how, Tony Hicks—you know enough of both these trades for such a purpose, or I am much mistaken; the when I *will* tell you, as you are so dull you must needs come to me for help. They go to rest early; the night is long enough for half a dozen such tasks as I have set you. Keep yourself sober, though I warn you; let me find it done—done well and effectually, and with no fuss, and I leave you better wages than a mason could earn in a week."

Tony would have remonstrated, but he dared not. Sarah left, and he cautiously examined the work she had set him. The difficulties did not seem so very great as at first. Sarah had told him the closet was unused, and he found this to be true. Moreover, the wall on his own side was thin, and not particularly well-built.

He had not the least doubt Sarah would keep her word, and reward him handsomely if he did her bidding. If he did not it was more than likely, or her eye wonderfully belied her, that she would reward him also in a widely different and by no means satisfactory manner. She was Stephen Lockstone's daughter, and, as he shrewdly judged, the master-spirit in his house; he must risk it, therefore, on all accounts.

And next day Sarah found the aperture made, which Frank Marsden subsequently discovered, as well as the temporary bit of wall of canvas and wood. Tony had also carefully sawn through the deal back of the closet, turned it into a door, and hung it on closely-fitting leather hinges, but farther than this he had not gone; and when Sarah saw how rough his workmanship was, she rejoiced that he had attempted no entrance into the room beyond, though she fully intended to do so herself. Many an hour did Sarah spend in that rough hole in the wall in Tony Hicks's parlour—many a con-

versation did she listen to, as she stood there an eavesdropper, that curled her lip with its most scornful smile, but she made no further advance till the day when the whole family were out, and Deborah herself gone marketing. For such an opportunity as this had she watched and waited, and not very patiently either, ever since the day of Frank's first examination of the cabinet. Sarah had imagined, and rightly, as it proved, that she knew the mystery of that spring of the secret drawer which so baffled Frank, and it was her scornful, mocking laugh that had broken on the stillness of their disappointment on that memorable day.

From that moment day after day found Sarah a patient waiter in that strange hiding-place that Tony Hicks had made her. Generally she sent him out of the house now as soon as she entered it, these days she retained him to wait upon her pleasure. At last she was rewarded. They all went out, even Deborah, and quick as thought Sarah summoned Tony, and pointed out the neat little woman as she was tripping quickly along the road.

"Follow her—watch her, and on your life don't let her come back into her house till you see this," and she held out her handkerchief, "hanging over your window."

Tony nodded his comprehension, and was follow-

ing poor innocent Deborah almost as quickly as Sarah herself could wish; for her, she only waited to secure the door after her messenger, then, hurrying back into her lair, she drew from one side, where she had concealed it days ago, a long thin sharp knife. This she rapidly, dexterously passed along the top and side of the closet door; as she hoped and anticipated, this yielded at once, and she stood within the Lees' room.

Her first act was to carefully examine and smooth the paper in the few places where it was in the least jagged, but she had been so skilful, her hand so light, and her instrument so sharp, that the cut was hardly visible in most places; her next to take a careful survey of the cabinet, so as to fix the position of its many drawers in her memory. And then, more rapidly than poor Frank himself even, she pulled them out, and laid bare the mysterious square hollow. Not long mysterious to her; she pressed her fingers quickly, and but twice on the spot where she suspected the spring existed; it yielded, flew back, and she drew forth a carefully-secured packet, folded, tied, sealed, and, as one glance told her, privately endorsed.

She put the paper she had provided herself with —that which so grievously disappointed Frank Marsden—in its place, closed the slide, and replaced the drawers. This last operation, however,

took her longer than she had reckoned on; accurate as were her observations, they had not been sufficiently so, and with one or two she had some trouble. At last, however, all were in their places, as she thought—everything restored to precisely the same order in which she had found it. She secured the abstracted packet in the bosom of her dress, and hastened back into Tony's premises. But a difficulty presented itself, the closet door could not be so shut from within as not to leave a tell-tale streak of light, or rather dark, in the wall; and more, the door itself once or twice slipped obstinately open; but Sarah, having successfully achieved her object, was not to be baulked now in covering her retreat.

At the same instant that she saw Deborah returning, closely followed by Tony, she discovered some of the tools he had used in constructing her post of observation still lying in disorder in the corner of the room. Rapidly selecting some nails and strips of leather, she made the outer door nearly as fast by their means as Tony's bolt had made the inner one; and convincing herself it was once more flush with the wall, and looking, in all probability, part and parcel of it as before, Sarah hoisted her signal. Deborah was allowed to pass, and Tony returned into his own domain.

He looked extremely curious as he entered the

room, where Sarah was still standing by the window, and said, with some self-gratulation of tone,

"I think I managed that matter pretty well, Miss Sarah, though she's as ticklish a lady to deal with as ever I came across. I followed her every step she went, and kept her out of her own gate almost by force till I saw your signal up."

Sarah eyed him with cold astonishment in her expression; she made questionable use of the man, but it displeased her he should in the least show his consciousness that she did so. She paid him for what she required of him, and, in return, expected him to act as a machine, moving as she set him going, presuming on neither question, comment, nay, hardly comprehension of what was done.

"You can paper over that door again," she said in a quiet tone of command; "do it this evening, and hide the awkward rents you have made in it as much as possible."

She had attained one great object for which she had the entrance contrived, and resolved that, for a time at least, it might be as well to suspend, if not give up her vigilant private surveillance of what went on at the Lees.' Indeed, she never frequented her observatory again, as it turned out. Now, the absence of the lath, plaster, and rubbish which ought to have been there, but which Tony had

cleared away in obedience to Sarah, rendered the partitions so very thin, that it was perfectly easy for Tony to hear much of what was passing when he so pleased, even after the canvas was up. When therefore Frank's investigation of the origin of the newly-discovered crack began, every word, or almost every word, was audible to Tony, who chanced to be sitting, then sober as yet, alone, with a pipe in his mouth, and a glass of spirits and water before him.

He only waited to hear Frank open the real original door to the closet, and then took himself off, as fast as his legs could carry him, to the Manor, to report on it. His reception there still rankled in his mind, and when Frank came to him, immediately on his return, he was not at all sorry that he need make no very vigorous resistance to the search the young man was evidently bent on. He had no orders as to that, he thought, grinning a little maliciously to himself, so he wouldn't act on his own authority this time—let things take their course; and he was rather glad when they did take the course of Frank's discovering the secret communication, and being evidently bent on making some stir in the matter.

He'd keep to his story, he thought; there were no witnesses—nothing could be proved either way. He was quite safe, so was his hush money, if so it might be called; and as to anything else, nothing

would please him better than that any annoyance or fright should result to Sarah from his pertinaciously holding to the letter of his instructions, and that only.

"'She bid me do it, and I have," he muttered to himself, with a grin of satisfaction over his anticipated vengeance; "and I should like to see her well frightened because of it—that is, if she could be frightened at anything."

CHAPTER VII.

THINGS were not going any more prosperously with poor Reuben Hernshaw; in fact, rather the reverse; for a seventh child had been born to him, and his wife had fallen so seriously ill with a fever, just as she had begun to get about again, that Dr. Armsdaile had to be called in; and for a week there was a dread fear, a terrible uncertainty whether the cherished wife, the loving mother of all those still motherward-looking little ones, the industrious useful mistress of Meadowlands farm, would be spared to those who needed her so sorely.

But the crisis passed, and Mrs. Hernshaw was slowly but surely progressing to recovery. Still her illness had been a heavy pull on her troubled husband in more ways than one, and the other troubles didn't seem mending—rather the reverse, indeed, since Stephen Lockstone had taken to going about his estate more, instead of regularly frequenting his old office. He seemed to be for ever poking into some corner or other of Meadowlands farm—complaining of one fence not being in good repair,

of another being grubbed without special leave, of this or that deviation from the terms of the lease, till Reuben was harassed into a state of mind which did not augur well for his business. He had ever disliked Stephen Lockstone, now he fairly loathed the sight of him, and his thoughts were far more filled with rancour against his tormentor, and, if truth must be told, it is to be feared with earnest wishes to retaliate also, in full measure, all the petty annoyances and injuries practised on him, than with the single-minded object of attending to his business, and carrying it on, in the best fashion he had power to discover, as had hitherto been the case.

No wonder, then, that things went wrong, and that when Reuben did set his mind solely to looking into this or that, and its cause, there seemed to him no way of righting them. Nothing but a chaotic puzzle, a great spider's web, of purposely woven difficulties and irritating subjects of continual petty disputes, into which he, the unhappy innocent fly, had been dragged by the weaver, despite all his best endeavours to steer clear of it.

Mrs. Hernshaw was leaning back in the great easy-chair, in the most comfortable corner of the kitchen, watching the performances of her maid, and now and then directing her movements. She looked very pale and wan still, and her hands were

thin and transparent, and looked very weak, though they held a child's frock, and every now and then, as they were able, continued their work upon it. Most people in her case would have considered themselves—and with truth—as still an invalids, and privileged to idleness; Mrs. Hernshaw declared herself nearly well, only not quite strong, and that she could not prove the truth of her assertion by unremitting needlework at any rate, was a sore distress to her.

The evening was drawing in, and the fresh log or two the mistress had directed the girl to put on the fire, in anticipation of her husband's coming home, were just beginning to blaze and crackle cheerily, when Reuben entered. His open, honest brow wore a look of gloom, almost of malice, that it was most unusual, till of late, to see there. He went up to his wife, and tenderly asked how she felt herself now; but that done, retreated to one of the settles, and threw himself down on it almost out of her sight, and remained sunk in a moody silence. The wife turned herself with some difficulty, and looked at him now and again very anxiously. Presently she said,

"Tilly, you'd better go and see to getting the young ones washed for tea. I'll make it while you're gone, if you'll shove the table a bit nearer."

The buxom servant lass did as she was bidden,

and with a "Have an eye to the pot, missus, too, plaze," departed on her mission.

Then Mrs. Hernshaw softly called to her husband.

"Reuben, my man—Reuben," a little louder, as the first call of her voice, weak from her illness, and weaker still at the moment from the emotions agitating her with regard to her husband, failed to rouse him; and as he looked up at last, with a sort of attempt to smile on her, she went on, "come and sit a bit nearer, Reuben, will ye?—I've had the doctor here again to-day, and I want to talk to you a bit, man."

This time Hernshaw was fairly roused, and crossed hastily to his wife's side, exclaiming, in an eager, broken tone,

"Ye're getting better, Mary, lass—he told me so himself—he couldn't say no other to you," and he gazed on her with an intense anxiety, which showed he had not entire faith in the truth of his own assertion.

She smiled, and a bright flush flitted over her matronly cheek—it was pleasant to feel sure that, after all, her recovery was more to him than anything else.

"To be sure he couldn't, Reuben, dear; and as to that, why, I'm well now, you know, or near upon it—it wasn't ought of me I wanted to speak about; but, Reuben," and her voice changed,

"you've been having another set-out with that man—I know it by your look. I can't bear to see you look like that, Reuben—don't ye mind him."

"How's man to help it, I should like to know?" burst forth poor Reuben in despair; "he's the very devil himself for aggravation, Mary."

"Hush! hush! dear. Don't talk like that; and why should ye care what he is, or what he does, if keep to your lease ye must?—why, he's bound to it too, and has no call to interfere with us, as I can see."

"No; and it's just that where it is," said the poor farmer, who, in his hónest simplicity, was a very ill-match for Stephen Lockstone, and precisely that disposition on which that crafty person's ingeniously-devised tortures took most effect, as he probably knew perfectly well while practising them. Reuben's true, upright, and warm-hearted nature gave him opportunities of persecution which would not have arisen with other men; while, also, on other men, all his petty malice could have invented of annoyance and unjust attacks, would not have told as they did on poor perplexed Hernshaw.

"Why mind him, then, Reuben, dear? Just let him go on as he will, and take your own course. He'd weary of worrying you after a bit."

Excellent and very sensible advice, and so her husband felt.

"I think so myself sometimes, Mary; but then again, he's a lawyer, you know, and I'm not, and if I did get into a mess with him, oh! dear."

"What's he been at to-day?"

"Just going on about the top croft field—telling me I hadn't kept it richly dressed enough, according as I was bound to by the terms of my lease. I'm sure it's in as good condition as any land in the parish; and anyone would say so, let him be who he would, if he know'd anything of it, which Stephen Lockstone don't," added Reuben, spitefully.

"What did you answer him?"

"Just nothing at all, till he went on that way, I couldn't bear it no longer, Mary, and then I told him over again, and more plain than I've ever spoke to him afore, that I wished the lease was at the bottom of the sea, and he along with it,—I thought,—Mary, heaven forgive me! but I don't think I spoke that aloud—I'm not sure; but that I'd give half the rent to be quit of it, I did; and I'm clean afraid what I mayn't say next, and that's the truth. It's beyond anybody's patience to have a man like that dogging, dogging one about one's own farm day after day, finding fault with this and that, and t'other, and knowing no more on it than our baby there, bless him! Why, my forbears held the farm long before there was any such name as Lockstone in the place, I'll warrant."

"It's a great deal too bad, Reuben, we all know that, dear; but have a care what you do say, for he's just the man to catch up a hasty word."

"And act on it—yes; and it's my belief it's just to drive me to that he's going on this way. He wants to spite me all he can, Mary, yet he won't let me off before the lease is out—if it goes on like this, he'll worry me into my grave before it is, I'm thinking; and yet I'll be bound he'd give a deal to get rid of me, too. It cuts two ways, you see," and Hernshaw spoke the latter words gleefully, and with far more spirit than he had exhibited before; "and I'm certain sure it's rank pison to him to see old Sawyer and his wife about the place, and Lady down there in the meadow, let alone me. It puts him too much in mind who ought to be here—at the Manor, I mean."

Reuben had pretty well talked himself into a happier frame of mind; his list of grievances poured forth, his heart was relieved, and he in a better condition to listen to what his wife had to say. She was a wise as well as a good and gentle woman, was Mary Hernshaw, and had considered this when deferring her own communication, and leading her husband to detail his own troubles and perplexities at as great a length as he would. Now she said—

"I've been thinking a good bit whether, if you

could speak to another lawyer, Reuben, he wouldn't be able to tell you something that could be done to make things more pleasant for you, since stay on we must."

"I don't know one, and they——" began Reuben, but his wife checked him and went on gently—

"That's just it, dear. Dr. Armsdaile has been telling me to-day that that nice young gentleman you liked so much before, Mr. Marsden, is down here again, staying with Mr. Lee, I think, Reuben, he said. Indeed, by the look and the way he had, I can't help fancying something's up between him and Miss Mabel."

"Miss Mabel put up with a lawyer man! Our Miss Mabel—not she!" cried the honest farmer indignantly.

"Why, Reuben, you said yourself he was a *real* gentleman, you were sure; and if he's a good one, it's better for poor Miss Mabel than living on there."

"Ah! that's true, Mary, dear," and Reuben sighed.

"Mind, the doctor never dropped a word of such a thing, and you mustn't either; it was only just my thought, you know, and I may be as wrong as wrong can be. You mustn't open your lips on it, Reuben, will you?"

Her husband gave the required assurance, and she went on—

"Now, why not go straight to Mr. Marsden, and ask him about it; I know he'd put you in a way to get over it, if it can be."

"Ah! that he would, and make it as plain as a pike-staff too! He's a clever head on his shoulders, I'll be sworn—a deal cleverer than Stephen Lockstone's, for all he's done for himself."

"Well, to-morrow's market-day, and you'll be in Merestown, Reuben. Just go down to Newman's Buildings and speak to him."

"I don't like, Mary. I've not been near such a time, you know, and now just to go for my own ends like."

Mary did not remind her husband how she had urged his going before, if only to ask after 'the old family,' and let young Reuben take a bunch of the flowers he was so fond of, and tended so carefully, since there was nothing else to take that they could very well spare just now. But she said,

"Just tell Miss Mabel all the truth, Reuben; she won't feel a grudge to you, I know, and will put in a good word for you, too, with the young gentleman, if it be as I think."

"I can't bear to go empty-handed, Mary, and you know it; and there's never a chicken fit to be

killed, and I can't spare nothing else, for I must keep back all the eggs and butter money from you still, to help pay the men, unless I draw out of the savings' bank, and I don't like just to do that till I'm forced to it, for fear of a worse day yet. Mayhap I may sell some corn to-morrow, but I don't know. I begin to think Stephen Lockstone's contrived to give even that a bad name in the market somehow, and he not letting Tuffnell take it and all."

"Tell Miss Mabel all about it," urged his wife again.

Reuben shook his head, but not very resolutely, and she went on—

"There are some of the cluster grapes left; Miss Mabel used to be very fond of them, Reuben, and they're rare fine this year. Take her a basket of them. They'll maybe be a treat to her now."

Hernshaw still hesitated, but after a little more persuasion from his wife, and the information that Dr. Armsdaile had told her Miss Mabel had been very anxious to know how she got on, and had wished she could come over and see her, he yielded; and the next day, as soon as the market was over —that part of it that concerned himself, at least— he bent his steps towards Newman's Buildings.

He still felt very shy of his expedition, and had

chosen to go there last instead of first, that the dusk might shield him from any observation from the windows. Perhaps he shouldn't see Miss Mabel at all—only Deborah, and hear of Mr. Marsden; and he was not quite sure whether this result would be most satisfactory or the reverse.

Deborah opened the door, and, in spite of the gathering gloom of late autumn twilight, recognised the farmer at once, and greeted him in a somewhat indignant and reproachful tone.

"Well, I'm sure! This is a sight for sore eyes! So you've found your way into this part again at last, Mr. Hernshaw?"

Poor Reuben stammered out something of his wife's illness, feeling very guilty all the time.

"Yes," Deborah answered in rather softer tones, "right glad we were to hear she was likely to be about again soon; but she hasn't been laid up five months or more, Mr. Hernshaw, and it's just about as long as that since you darkened our door last."

Lightened would have expressed the facts better. Five months was it? Reuben had never reckoned, he had been afraid to do so; he knew, what with his own troubles, and what with his distress at his apparent neglect of the much-respected Lee family, it had seemed twice five to him; but that was long enough—too long in all conscience.

"It hasn't been my fault altogether, Mrs. De-

borah," he ventured to explain, but she cut him short with the sharply-uttered response—

"Not your fault! I'm sure it wasn't ours, then. Miss Mabel looked for you many a day you never came, Mr. Hernshaw, till she was weary of looking in vain; and all the few friends left her seemed to be forsaking her again, just as trouble came thickest—and she'd had enough of that before."

The words pierced Reuben's conscience sorely. He did not comprehend their full meaning, but he now wished he had come, as his wife had desired him.

"I've thought more than enough of her, and all of you, Mrs. Deborah, but I've been sore bestead myself, and am now."

He spoke very pitifully, and Deborah, having now vented her long-garnered wrath against him, became forgiving at once. Everything was so much happier, too, in the atmosphere of No. 5, she could afford to be so cheerfully.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear you've been in troubles, too, Mr. Hernshaw; they come thick enough on us at times, and t'would be very hard to bear if we weren't pretty sure there'd be an end some time. The wood's thick enough and dark enough when we're in the middle of it, but there's light on the outside if we could but see it."

"And that's true, only we're pretty near done for, some of us, before we do see it, though, as Mary says, we oughtn't to be; we know it's all right, if we can trust and bide a bit, like Job. But she's more of his sort, is Mary, than I am—far away, I'm a poor hand and a coward heart at that business, somehow, though I know better, and try at it. And now, Mrs. Deborah, can you get me speech of young Mr. Marsden?—he's here, isn't he?"

"He *was* here," returned Deborah, with a peculiar emphasis on the words.

"He isn't gone, and I too late after all?"

"You're more like too early than too late, for that matter, as I suppose he'll whisk in here again some time to-night; but as to answering for him, it's more than I can do these two days. He's been in and out, in and out, like a cat that's lost her kittens, worriting one's life out, and putting poor master right beside himself."

Deborah spoke very indignantly; she was fully aware that Frank's movements were not guided by caprice, and that there was sufficient and reasonable excuse for his erraticism; but that did not reconcile her to the inconveniences it occasioned, nevertheless, and she was not sorry for a chance of relieving her mind on the subject where she could do so in safety.

"Then I can't see him?" queried Reuben, dolefully.

It was hard to have worked himself up to the necessary pitch of courage, and all for nothing.

"Well, I'll not answer for that. But I'll ask Miss Mabel; she's more likely to know than I," and, in spite of Hernshaw's entreaties that she would not, she went to the door, and beckoned Mabel out.

"Ah! Mr. Hernshaw, how are you?" was her pleasant, reassuring greeting, as she saw who it was in the doorway. "I am very glad to see you have not quite forgotten us, after all; and Mrs. Hernshaw, too, Dr. Armsdaile has brought us good news of her lately; but what a sad trial you have had!" and she looked sympathisingly into his face.

Reuben drew his hand across his eyes.

"Ah! Miss, you may well say that. Thank God, she's looking up again now! But it was a sorrowful house for many a day; and, Miss, I—I should have come just as usual to you, only I've had other things to bear too before she was ill. I've had a hard time of it, one way or another, Miss Mabel, and I've had nothing to bring, and so I couldn't get the face to come, though Mary—she often spoke of it, and said I was wrong."

"She thought we should have been glad to see

an old friend in any case, eh?—and she was quite right—but never mind that now you are here again at last. I wish I could say come in, but papa is down now, you know, and I am afraid I had better not."

"No, surely, Miss, I never thought of such a thing," Reuben answered, and Deborah now came to his assistance by explaining that he wished to see young Marsden, and would be glad to know if such a thing were likely to-night.

"I am afraid not, though I really cannot say," Mabel answered. "He will not be here again till very late, if at all; but will it do on Monday, Mr. Hernshaw? I am sure he will go over and see you if he possibly can then, if that will do?"

"Oh! yes, Miss, it would do, and very nicely; but I don't like to trouble him, only, you see, that Stephen Lockstone just fairly worrits the life out of me, and I'm at my wits' end, and beyond, to know what to do for the best."

"I am sure Mr. Marsden will go and do all he can to help you—I will tell him; and now, good night. Papa will miss me if I stay away longer. Tell your wife how very glad we are to hear she is recovering. Oh! what beautiful grapes!—the old clusters we were so fond of when we were children, and stood at the foot of the ladder watching you gather them. Mrs. Hernshaw

thought I should like some—I do indeed; thank you very much, and remember me most kindly to her. I would go and see her if I could, tell her, and perhaps Dr. Armsdaile may take me over some day. Good night," and Mabel hastened back into the parlour, where her father was already impatient at her absence.

Deborah insisted on Reuben's waiting for his basket, so he lingered on the steps while she went to take out the grapes; and as he stood so, he thought he heard a strange noise of angry voices and struggling. He looked round, but could see nothing; the gardens about were, so far as he could observe, and that was for some distance, silent and untenanted; the road was certainly deserted, so he concluded he had been mistaken. He listened again, and could hear nothing, and as Deborah at the same moment brought back his basket, he bid her good night, and turned away.

Scarcely, however, had he reached the gate, and Deborah had but that instant closed the door, when a hoarse cry for help burst upon the stillness, mingled with that dread word which sends a chill to the heart of the stoutest and bravest—*Murder!* Twice it rang through the still evening air, with a sharp, piercing tone that spoke but too truly of the fearful bodily peril which extorted so earnest and desperate an appeal for aid. Reuben Hern-

shaw dropped his basket, and after listening intently for one moment, to better purpose than before, sprang with one bound over the garden-wall next door to No. 5, Newman's Buildings, and striding up the walk, reached the door just at the very moment that it was torn open, and a figure without a hat, and bearing every token of terror about the disordered person and blanched face, darted out, wrenched itself from the clutch which Reuben vainly strove to fix upon his arm, and fled away down the garden, and on, and on, into the dim uncertainty of the road beyond, where the feeble oil-lamps were not yet beginning to make the darkness around more impenetrable. For a second or two the amazed farmer gazed in bewilderment after the retreating figure. Were his eyes playing him false? Could it be? Here, in this place, and engaged in any deed of violence? No, that surely was not possible, whatever else might be; and with a strange horror at his heart, Reuben turned to the half-open door, and strove to hear or see some sign of life or habitation within. In vain! There had been noise and stir enough a few short minutes ago—the angry strife of the most evil of human passions—but that was over now; and as Hernshaw strove eagerly but uselessly to penetrate through the intense gloom of the passage, which, in contrast to the uncertain dusk

without, looked black in its extreme darkness—a darkness that might indeed be felt—a feeling of awe crept over him, and he shuddered, without knowing why. The stillness was as terrible as the darkness—no movement, no sound. All impenetrable night, with a painful, brooding silence, that seemed to betoken something that was most horrible.

Poor Reuben was making a desperate effort to shake off the feeling of dread and almost supernatural awe that was oppressing him, and had made one step within that fearful passage, which, it seemed to him, was hiding some horrible mystery—some dreadful crime it might be—when his own name, spoken in a terrified whisper, startled and arrested him.

"Mr. Hernshaw! Mr. Hernshaw! is that you?" were the words, uttered, as he soon discovered, by poor Deborah, who, frightened well-nigh out of her senses, had nevertheless summoned courage to creep stealthily to the side of the low wall dividing the gardens, and was now peering over, and had distinguished his figure on the door-step, in spite of the dusky twilight enveloping all around. "What is it?" she added, in a terrified tone.

"God knows, Mrs. Deborah!" Hernshaw answered, solemnly, "I don't; but I've a great fear on me something's amiss. Could you lend me

a light, for there's nothing but darkness here?"

Deborah speedily retreated, coming back with a lantern in her hand sooner than Reuben had hoped for as possible. She brought it round to where he was standing, and as she was coming up the walk, he asked, in a low tone,

"Are they frightened? Did they hear?"

"No, not rightly; and a great blessing it is, Mr. Hernshaw, poor master was so put out at young Mr. Marsden being so long away, he was complaining of it to Miss Mabel, so none of them heard nothing but a cry."

Deborah was too agitated to add that Mabel had come out to know what it was, and that she had pacified her as best she could, but quite effectually, before she had herself ventured out to see if she could ascertain what might be really the matter.

Holding the lantern before him, Hernshaw cautiously advanced into the passage, and finally through the wide-open door into the parlour, where he stopped suddenly, exclaiming to Deborah, who had followed him so far at a little distance,

"Keep back, Mrs. Deborah, for mercy's sake keep back—this is no sight for you!" and Deborah saw he was stooping down as he spoke. Presently he turned back towards her, and, with a face blanched to a deathlike whiteness, said, "Should you be afraid to fetch the nearest doctor,

Mrs. Deborah—one should be here in no time?"

Deborah was neither a coward, nor one who shrinks from a task simply because it may not properly belong to her. A little fussy and complaining, now and then, in her ordinary ways, well and bravely as she walked in them, she was prompt in an hour of need—a sudden difficulty. Asking no questions, advancing not a step further, she quietly said, "I'll go;" and hastening out of the little square house, now the scene of a fearful tragedy, she sped on her way with all the haste she could command.

CHAPTER VIII.

STEPHEN LOCKSTONE did not much relish the errand on which, nevertheless, he was bent, quite as much through his own desire as by Sarah's urgings, though her contemptuous suggestions had no doubt spurred him on to its fulfilment more speedily than might otherwise have been the case.

He did not enjoy his interviews with Tony Hicks. They were even more distasteful to him than those *tête-à-têtes* with his daughter, when she assumed—and not undeservedly either, which made the matter a vast deal worse—the tone of the superior as to both courage and judgment. He was certain that their interests, at any rate, must be the same; he was not so very sure that his and Tony's were inseparably so. That individual had shown pretty plainly that he was not of that opinion, or at least that this was a state of affairs depending entirely on circumstances; and though all Sarah had said was probably quite true, and would prove to be so, Tony was quite capable of making himself ex-

tremely disagreeable before he allowed himself to be convinced of this, and in all probability would do so.

He believed himself possessed of the keys of one of the side-doors at any rate to the one thing which Stephen Lockstone dreaded—the cause of the one great fear which had made the man a coward in so many things of late years. The drunken old clerk had made his rich master quail before him more than once, and he was not slow to take advantage of the knowledge that he could do so. If he did not know as much as he would have liked to know, something he did, much he could guess at, and at all events the semblance of the knowledge had served him as yet in quite as good stead as the reality might, perhaps.

So thought Tony, and on his thoughts he had acted, till the craven master of Lee Manor felt like a charmed serpent before his tamer; he would fain have thrown off the toils, he did not really believe in their tangible existence, and yet in the presence of the man he was powerless, felt himself writhing under their pressure, and totally unable to withstand in any way their invisible force, in whatever fashion it pleased Tony to exercise it.

With this conviction and this experience strong upon him, Stephen Lockstone was in no hurry to execute the task he had undertaken; and though he

went into Merestown fully determined to get it over first and at once, he delayed and delayed, finding first one pretext and then another for his cowardly procrastination, till the afternoon drew on and on—nay, the dull light in his office grew dimmer and dimmer, and he knew that further postponement was impossible. To go back to the Manor without having had the proposed interview with Tony, was still more to be dreaded than that interview itself, greatly as he disliked it, and shrank from its anticipation.

Perhaps Tony would be out; then he would have tried to follow Sarah's suggestions to the best of his power, and the failure would not lie at his door. His spirits rose with the idea. It was more than likely—most likely Tony would have come into Merestown long ago; the only wonder was he had not sought him out before this, and so forestalled his proposed visit. Thankful that he had not, and with movements greatly hastened by the idea that he might still do so, Stephen Lockstone took his hat, and leaving orders with Rachel that the carriage was to wait his return, as he might be detained where he was going, he set off at last, and wended his way, not very rapidly, to Newman's Buildings. The last time he had gone thither, it had been with the design of persecuting the poor imbecile old man, that he might discover, if pos-

sible, what would, so he thought and believed, if discovered, have put him in perfect safety, restored his long-lost courage, placed him above all fear of Tony Hicks, or anything else, made him the successful, happy man he ought to be, but was not.

That expedition had proved a terrible failure—what would the present one result in?

Stephen Lockstone had scarcely gone the length of the High Street, when a visitor rang at the bell of his old house in it—a strange visitor to be seen there now-a-days, though once how familiar a one, as he himself thought as he pulled the bell. No other than Frank Marsden, who had been fully occupied for the last two days in endeavouring to prove the identity and trace the former career of Tony Hicks. This he had found far more difficult than he had hoped or anticipated. Tony had not cared—for reasons, no doubt strong and good, but best known to himself—to recall his remembrance to many of his old associates. Indeed not very many of these remained, who would have been willing themselves probably to have recognised the disreputable looking old man as a former familiar.

Few, if any, of those who had lived lives similar to his own, were now living, or, if living, no longer in Merestown; and they who had followed better courses, had prospered in their honesty and industry, and were not in a position for the dissi-

pated old clerk to be an acquaintance they would be anxious to claim.

Twenty years bring many and great changes even among the respectable members of society. What change it does not effect in the inferior grades, especially in large towns, it is impossible to say; and he must have been either a very important, or a most dearly-loved man who would be generally recognised when returning amid them, after such an absence. Tony had calculated on this in a measure, and was not out in his reckoning. He was looked on as a stranger in his native town.

After many inquiries and weary researches, all to no purpose, beyond the confirmation of what Frank already knew, or at any rate guessed at, as a certainty—viz., that Tony was an idle sort of man, who spent most of his time at the public-houses, was a new comer, and, so far as anyone knew, a stranger—he at last came across one man whose knowledge extended a little farther. He not only knew all these facts as to Tony, but he also knew he was a frequenter of Stephen Lockstone's house, whether as a visitor to the lawyer, or to the old servant, he was not quite clear—he rather thought to the latter; anyhow, he was in there times out of number after the "gentleman" had gone home.

So, there was very strong ground now whereon

to rest his original suspicion, that Tony was a sort of agent of the lawyer. Very little was needed to turn suspicion into conviction; but how to get at that little, was the question. One not facile to answer either, and surrounded by difficulties it was by no means easy to see a way through. To go to Stephen Lockstone would not be pleasant, to say the least, after what had passed. Even if he went, it was not at all certain he would see him; or, if he did, that he would not decline to enter on such a subject. Indeed, the probabilities were strong that he would—he might not even acknowledge any acquaintance with Tony. It would be the wisest course, no doubt; and Stephen Lockstone, so far as Frank Marsden's experience of him went, was fully alive to what was wisest to be done, when any object of self-interest was at stake.

The whole thing was encompassed by difficulty. If he applied directly to the police, as he had once thought of doing, besides the mischief of making the matter public, and thus probably losing some chances of discovery, what had he to say, what even to show, beyond the state of the wall on either side, which, although very securely built up again into the complete barrier it was intended to be, and under Frank's own superintendence, too (for, on second thoughts, he had not left Tony entirely to his own devices even as regarded his

own side), was yet not so restored but that it would be easy for any person to see exactly how, and how far, it had been originally tampered with.

Still, what did that prove? Tony would swear, as he had said, that he had had no hand in it; while on the other side no soul among the Lees could declare that anyone had entered their premises, any single thing been taken from them. Frank himself could not be sure—that is, not sure enough for the purposes of a court of justice, however morally certain that the cabinet had been opened. If no loss had been sustained, and no clandestine entrance proved, what case was there?

There remained only the simple fact that there was an unusual sort of communication possible between the two houses, which was far more visible on the Lees' side than on Tony's, and of the existence of which both tenants were, according to their own showing, equally ignorant. No. If he even had down a detective at once, Frank thought there was not enough for him to work on as yet; and though he certainly looked forward to taking such a step eventually, he was very desirous to see his way a little clearer himself first. Thus, after many *pros* and *cons*, and much self-debating, with no very satisfactory result, the young man at last resolved he would at any rate try and see Stephen Lockstone. If he was ad-

mitted to an interview, it was just possible something might drop from him incidentally, or some look betray, in a degree, what he would doubtless take very good care to conceal in his words.

So Frank rang at the bell, and Rachel appeared. Now it chanced that, so far as that grim individual was capable of liking any one, she had liked Frank. He had always been kind and civil to her, while in his donations he had been liberal, and Rachel had long ago begun to value money nearly as highly as Mr. Geldfinder himself, though for very different purposes. She looked astounded when she saw who had summoned her from her comfortable tea, but not inimical, exactly—rather the reverse; she had believed it Tony, and did not want his company. Frank Marsden's pleasant face was not a disagreeable substitute for the sinister one of her old love. But she said nothing.

"Well, Rachel," and Frank looked kindly on the hard face regarding him, "you didn't expect to see me, did you?—but you and I were always good friends—how are you?"

"Oh! pretty much as usual, sir, for the matter of that—folks don't grow younger, and I don't know as there'd be much good if they did."

"Neither you nor I are likely to be able to try, Rachel," Frank answered, smiling. "Do you think I could see Mr. Lockstone?"

"He's not in."

"What, has he left?—I thought he was always later than this; and I know he came in to-day."

"No, he's not gone back yet, if you mean that—the carriage don't come for a good hour yet," and there was a scornful emphasis on the word "carriage," worthy of Sarah herself.

"Oh! he's only gone out somewhere, then—will he be long, do you think?"

"I don't think ought about it, Mr. Marsden; but he said if he wasn't back the man was to wait—you can make what you can of that."

Frank did make out that it was very uncertain when the lawyer would be back; nevertheless, he determined to wait for a time, at any rate, and he asked Rachel if he might come in.

"I suppose so. I've no objection; into the old sitting-room, if you like."

And she threw open the door as she spoke, and smiled a very grim smile indeed. How queer it was, she thought, that they all came back one after another! Mr. Lockstone, from his fine new home to his dusty old office; Sarah, from the beautiful grounds and luxurious apartments of the Manor to the dark quaint chamber of which she had seemed so weary when it was the one family sitting-room; Tony Hicks had come back too, back to her kitchen—from—no one, not even Rachel herself, knew

where ; and now here was the old lover come back too, long after the girl he had loved was married and gone. Everything and everybody did come back, she supposed, only not just the same—she had heard some said the world turned round, and so it did, seemingly, bringing things back and back, round and round again—but with a strange difference. Frank broke suddenly in on her reflections—

"Do you happen to know a man of the name of Hicks, Rachel?"

She looked him straight in the face before replying. Was any harm coming to Tony? Like enough. Well, she didn't care now very much if it was, perhaps she would be glad, so she answered boldly, after a moment's pause—

"Yes, I know Tony Hicks well enough."

It was Rachel he wanted to see, then, after all, Frank thought, a little disappointed ; but he went on—

"A friend of yours, is he, Rachel ; can you tell me what he is?"

"Nothing good for much, that I know of, Mr. Marsden ; and no particular friend of mine neither, though, maybe, he was a bit of a one twenty years or more ago!"

"Before you lived here, I suppose?"

"Before I lived here! How on earth should

I ever have known Tony if I hadn't lived here then ?"

"I thought he seemed a stranger in the town."

"Strange enough now, it's likely, but he's a native of it, for all that, and was clerk here a good many months, if not years."

Ah ! Here was something worth knowing, then, and learned without difficulty, too.

"Mr. Lockstone's clerk, was he ?"

"Yes, and a smartish sort of fellow in those days."

And Rachel needed little cross-questioning to tell all she knew of Tony Hicks' connexion with his old master, and of his late visits to him.

Frank rejoiced, as he listened, that fortune had so far favoured him ; whether he saw Stephen Lockstone or not, he now knew much of what he had desired to know. He would await his return, nevertheless, and try for an interview ; if granted, he should go to it far better prepared to press the lawyer on the different points he wished to gather light on, and should be much better able to meet the prevarications and equivocation he fully expeeted to encounter.

So he let Rachel return to her tea, which was not attended by the black bottle this time, and resigned himself to an indefinite waiting in the sitting-room, which had been witness of so much of

his boyish devotion to that unworthy idol, Hester Lockstone. He could afford to smile at its remembrance, to be almost indifferent even to the shame which was the chief feeling that had existed for a long time past. A very different being possessed, and had accepted his heart now, accepted it in spite of its unworthy delusions of the past; and with Mabel his own—his own, though she knew it all—he could be indifferent to everything that the quaint sombre old room kept recalling to his memory.

Meanwhile Stephen Lockstone hastened forward, comforting himself with the hope that his visit would prove a vain one, so far as finding Tony Hicks at home went. The evil time might have to come at last; but it would be postponed, and Mr. Lockstone had so grown into the habit of postponement since his taking possession of Lee Manor, that it had become, as Sarah had once scoffingly informed him, "the one great happiness and occupation of his life."

Newman's Buildings were soon reached, and then Mr. Lockstone paused. He did not desire to encounter the Lees, not even young Marsden, who he had heard was down again, and he peered up the dull line of road more than once, and then down again. Nothing was visible in the gathering dusk, but a workman or two returning home with a bag

of tools on his back, from the building of other new houses still going on farther on below; so he ventured on at last, almost boldly entered the gate of No. 4, and walked up to the door.

There he hesitated once more, and once more peered cautiously about. Was Tony at home, or not? The window was much too grimy with the collected dust and dirt of weeks upon its panes to see through. The door was fast; all was still. Yes, Tony was out, he had very little doubt; and reassured, he gave a tolerably loud knock with the pert little knocker, thinking, as he did so, "I'll rap twice, and then go away."

No need, Stephen Lockstone. The last echo of his rat-tat had not died away, when the door was stealthily opened half way, and Tony's red face, redder and more unpleasant-looking than ever, peered round it. He had not been out for more than a quarter of an hour at a time since Frank Marsden's visit on the discovery of the door of communication. He thought it quite as well to be in the way in case of accidents, and did not desire to risk being confronted by that gentleman, accompanied by any man in authority in the town, which he thought might be possible, should they meet there. So Tony had kept close; but not the less certainly had he comforted himself with his usual potations, and he was now not exactly sober, if not absolutely

drunk, when he opened the door to his old master.

He threw it wide on seeing who it was.

"Law! Mr. Lockstone, this is a compliment; pray come in." And as the unfortunate man did go in, not overwillingly, and evidently by no means delighting in the visit he was paying, Tony looked at him askance, and demanded in a different tone, "What's up now?"

It was not a promising opening, and Stephen Lockstone felt it so. He walked forward into the sitting-room with an attempt at dignity, and seated himself on one of the chairs Tony had originally invested in, with the view of impressing Rachel with the superiority and comfort of his abode. The room smelt strongly of spirits, and a just-emptied glass was, as usual, on the table, by the black bottle; a melancholy-looking fire was trying to keep itself alive in the grate, but threw neither light nor warmth about the nasty, comfortless room.

Stephen Lockstone shuddered.

"Can't you get a light, Tony?" he asked, as he looked around the dim, almost dark apartment.

"A light, to look at you, Mr. Lockstone?" queried Tony impudently; "oh! yes, if you're so anxious for it, but I like the fire myself," and as he spoke he brought forward a broken tallow candle, which hung with a graceful bend out of the neck of one of his emptied black bottles, and,

stooping over the fire, nearly tumbled into it in his attempts to set light to the match in his hand.

His visitor watched his helpless manœuvres in silence. He longed to light the candle himself, but it might have derogated from the superiority of his position, with which he was more than commonly anxious to impress Tony, and therefore he refrained. Tony sober was not a pleasant person to encounter on such an errand as had brought him hither. Tony more than half drunk was a great deal worse, and the lawyer began to wish he had, after all, sent for Tony to come to him at his office. However, he had not done so, and there was nothing for it now but to make the best of a bad mistake; so he waited patiently till the candle was at last lighted, and set very triumphantly on the extreme edge of the table by Tony, who next threw himself, half lying, half sitting, cross the sofa.

Mr. Lockstone glanced round again; however greasy the window, and however weakly the light from that tallow-candle, passers-by would no doubt be able to see into the room now with tolerable ease, and that wouldn't do at all. He had no desire to be seen, as Tony Hicks's visitor especially by any of the Lees.

"Can't you shut the shutter, Tony?" he asked very mildly.

"Well, I s'pose I can if I choose; but la! bless me, Mr. Lockstone, I'm getting tired of not being master in my own house," and Tony looked almost fierce. He was thinking of Frank Marsden as well as his present visitor when he spoke, but of that the latter was necessarily ignorant, and he looked askance at the man, and wished once more that he had sent for him to his own office, while he replied, still somewhat meekly,

"I've nothing to say about that, Tony; but I think it's just as well for both of us the shutter should be closed."

"For you, you mean," returned Tony sneeringly. He was just sufficiently drunk to feel very indifferent as to the possible consequences of his words, and very valiant where no necessity for it existed. "I don't care who sees me, but if you're such a sneak, have your way," and he tumbled off the sofa, and closed and barred the shutter with a bang.

Stephen Lockstone mused a while if Sarah would consider Hicks's state a sufficient reason for his deferring the arrangement he had come about till a more convenient season. The result of his cogitation was not satisfactory; he did not think she would. To find Tony perfectly sober was the exception, not the rule, and she probably knew this quite as well as he.

"Well, Tony," he said, mustering all his courage, and turning round to him as the shutter-bar dropped into its moorings, "I'm come to have a little talk with you, and settle our affairs once and for all."

Tony did not immediately answer. He was not too drunk to comprehend that a good deal might depend on such a proceeding as that. He made an effort to steady himself body and mind, and partly succeeding, walked round the little deal table, and, leaning his hand on it, faced his old master, and looked at him long and cunningly before he said, "What does that mean, Mr. Lockstone, I should like to know?"

"It means, Tony, that what I told you once before I tell you again—that I don't care for having you always about this place, and I'd rather you'd leave altogether."

"And if I'd rather not?"

"Oh! but you'll be too reasonable for that, Tony. Look here, I'll agree to allow you exactly what I do now, and two shillings a week over, if you'll undertake to go to London, or anywhere, so it's forty miles from this place, and not come back again. That's a fair offer, isn't it?"

"Oh! it's beautiful!—quite liberal!" returned Tony, with as much bitter irony as he could command in his tone. "Two shillings over the pit-

tance you give me now—eh, Mr. Lockstone? And for that I'm to go and live just where you choose, and not come to see my friends here ever again, if you have your will. That is a handsome offer, that is!" and Tony laughed sardonically.

Stephen Lockstone's causeless terror was somewhat lessened by this time, and he was beginning to get a little nettled by Tony's manner and words. After all, as Sarah said, what could he gain by speaking? He had no proof, and who would listen to the half-learnt, unsupported story of such a man? So he took heart, and spoke up bravely this time.

"I think it is, Tony—I'm not bound to give you anything that I see."

"Dear me, no—not at all! That's just like you, and such as you, Stephen Lockstone; get a man to do all he can for you, and then turn round and say you needn't give him a brass farthing to help himself, if you don't choose. But that won't pay with me, sir, as I've told you before. Be reasonable, and you'll find me the same; but if you turn rusty, two can play that game, you know."

"Turn rusty and be d——d to you!" the lawyer answered, angrily. "What could you do? You'd best close with my terms, if you wish to make any at all, I tell you."

"Now, Stephen Lockstone," and Tony spoke

deliberately—warningly—"just mind what you're after, if you wish to stop where you've pushed yourself in. I leave you with £15,000 a year or so, I s'pose it is, and you grudge me as many shillings. I don't take it as Mr. Marsden would if I just gave him a hint."

Mr. Lockstone turned pale, though he answered, contemptuously enough,

"Pshaw!—lawyers don't care for hints, fool, if they can't be backed up by a fact or so—and such hints as you can give, too."

"I expect he would care a pretty deal for my hints, then; and I don't say but what I could bring a fact or two as well," and Tony fumbled in his breast-pocket, and drew from thence a greasy, well-thumbed pocket-book. This he held out towards his old master in one hand, while he tapped it emphatically with the other. "I've got a scrap or two of papers in there—more than you know of, Mr. Lockstone—one, I've told you before, I hadn't got, but I have; and as to the other, when I drew up that bit of a paper some two or three-and-twenty years back it is now, I've a notion, why, I just had a sort of curiosity about it, and that didn't get less after the journey you sent me on, so I just took a rough draft of it for myself—'tisn't well to trust to one's memory too much, you see."

It was with some difficulty Stephen Lockstone restrained the rising passion in his bosom—a passion of mingled anger against this audacious, lying clerk, who had dared so to avail himself of his former position in his office, and then to keep his own counsel so long; and of terror—abject terror as to what the paper could be—how it might affect him—what it might betray. Surely he had been too careful to allow anything very seriously telling on the matter to come under his clerk's notice—and yet he could not tell. He was in a maze. He had dwelt so long on this one point of doubt, fear, and anxiety, that he could trust neither his judgment nor his memory in reflecting on it. He made a great effort to control his real feelings, and say, in as indifferent a voice as he could command,

"What folly have you got into your head now, you blackguard?—what papers, do you suppose, you can show that haven't been hauled over long ago? I tell you, Hicks, you've no claim on me, and no shadow of hope of getting a shilling from anyone else."

"There may be two opinions on that, as I've said more than once, Steve Lockstone; and the old man ain't dead over there either, though I told you he was. What would folks say now, for instance"—and he spoke the words slowly,

significantly pausing on each—"to be set to look at just one figure on a bit of paper?—a two on one side or the other don't make much difference sometimes—sometimes it makes all there is," and Tony Hicks stopped abruptly.

He had, after all, only made a guess—a chance shot; but there was no doubt it had hit, and hit hard, too. Stephen Lockstone's face became positively convulsed by rage and fear, while it turned of a dead sallow hue as he listened to Tony's words. The two men gazed on each other for awhile in silence, after he had ceased to speak, and something as a couple of panthers may be supposed to do when some dainty morsel of prey is lying—a bone of contention between them.

Suddenly, as Mr. Lockstone slowly lowered the eyes that had been meeting his old clerk's with such an expression of concentrated hate and fear, they caught sight of, and rested for a second on, the pocket-book still held in Tony's extended palm. The papers were in there—once possessed of them, he could indeed set this man at defiance, even though that other still more important paper were lost. Which was strongest, he or Tony? The latter was the taller, and had once been a stouter man than himself, but he had grown thin, his hands very often trembled; he looked altogether enervated by drink—doubtless he was so,

and—— Stephen Lockstone did not continue his self-maintained debate. He gave a stealthy glance round the room, at the door, the window, the distance between himself and Tony, and then, with a sudden cat-like spring, he flew upon him, and seizing the pocket-book, struggled to wrench it from his hand. He was only partially successful. Tony had been more on his guard than the lawyer had bargained for, and a well-aimed blow with the right hand, which was at liberty, administered at the very instant Stephen Lockstone's clutch was on the pocket-book, sent him staggering towards the fire-place, and but that the firm grip he had taken, and which both men still kept on, held him up, he would no doubt have fallen straight down on the floor. As it was, his full, tight grasp at once prevented his fall, and enabled him to regain his lost equilibrium.

A terrible struggle ensued. Not only did both men feel that their future depended—that of the one entirely, that of the other altogether also, as regarded its peace—on the possession of that greasy, much slit pocket-book, but each had long felt a personal hatred for the other, increased at the moment to a fearful intensity by the deadly passion roused in such natures by the contest. Their blood was up, and every bad feeling was raging unchecked within their bosoms.

For a time it seemed very doubtful which would conquer—Tony's potations had given him a passing artificial strength, while Mr. Lockstone's one desire to obtain the pocket-book seemed to endow him with superhuman power in his grasp of it. He held it as a terrier does a rat, and to withdraw it thence seemed as hopeless as it would be to release the one creature from the other's grip.

Presently, as he was smarting under another sharp blow from Tony's hard knuckles, Stephen Lockstone, with a savage curse, sprang at the man's throat. He clutched it, while Hicks, leaving go the pocket-book, at last, in the desperate conflict for life itself, as this was now becoming, seized his old master round the waist, and lifted him for a moment from the ground. Not even then did Stephen Lockstone leave his hold of the just-secured treasure, he simply tightened his grasp of Tony's throat with the other hand, and at the same time pressed the whole weight of his body against him. Tony Hicks staggered, reeled, and both men came with violence to the ground, knocking down the table, and extinguishing the candle as they fell, Tony undermost; and then was uttered that desperate cry of mortal terror and agony which had so startled Reuben Hernshaw. It went forth on the night air, sharp, agonising—the last word ever uttered by the wretched man, Anthony

Hicks. Stephen Lockstone released him as he thus cried out, struck with terror himself at the word that fell on his ears, but at the same instant he gave him a heavy blow on his head. He knew not, and he cared not where. What did the fellow cry out so for, to rouse the neighbourhood? At that thought he repeated the blow; and then he listened—listened as those only can and do listen who have a very present fear of what may be justly impending over them. Not a sound broke the stillness within the room—Tony Hicks was passive enough now, and an involuntary shudder passed over his old master, as he felt for a moment, and then dropped, as though it had burned him, the hand which had but a few minutes before kept so tight a hold on the pocket-book now grasped in his own. At the same instant he started up; there was a sound—a sound outside—some one was coming, and, with a sort of instinct, for he was in total darkness, the one spark of fire having long ago gone out, he found the door, passed out along the passage, opened the outer one, wrenched himself from honest Reuben's sudden grip of his shoulder, and then, possessed by an overwhelming terror, an unreasoning panic, hardly knowing what he was doing, or why he did it—the conscience-bred fears and minutely increasing alarms of the past months brought to a desperate climax now—Stephen

Lockstone fled—fled away out into the damp darkness of the autumnal night, the pocket-book still grasped tight in his hand.

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK MARSDEN waited and waited on, patiently at first, and then, when the handsome carriage and its prancing horses came up to the door, and waited, too, not so patiently as Frank, the horses pawing and snorting, the men grumbling, low at first, but at length loudly, angrily, the young man's patience evaporated too, all at once, as it seemed to himself, perhaps from the force of sympathy, and seizing his hat, he let himself out, as he had done in former days many and many a time before, and hurried off with hasty, happy strides.

Let those quarrel who will with the adjective so applied, there *is* a happy stride, as well as an angry, an impatient, and half a dozen other more usually acknowledged ones. He had done a good stroke of business, after all, to-night—learnt more in those five minutes with Rachel than in all the investigations and wanderings of the whole two days besides. He had a right to a peaceful evening with Mabel, and he would allow himself the reward; besides, had he not better debate on his newly-acquired knowledge with her?

He had not quite reached the gate of No. 5, Newman's Buildings, when Deborah flew out upon him, gasping forth,

"Oh! sir, I'm right glad you're come at last. There's murder been done here—next door—and poor Mr. Hernshaw's beside himself to know what to do, and I can't keep it much longer from Miss Mabel, nor mistress neither."

Frank did not stop to ask any needless questions.

"Where is Hernshaw?" he demanded, quickly; and almost before poor Deborah, who was shaking like an aspen leaf, and pale as her own snowy cap, could stammer forth her answer, he was up the narrow path of the garden, and in at the open door of No. 4.

Plenty of light there now—plenty of light—and plenty of noise, though of a subdued sort, in awe of that ghastly thing lying there, stretched out across the deal table, its clothes still on, a deep, dark stain of clotted blood here and there on them, and on the table itself, near the head; while a pool of it was on the floor, near the place whence the table had been picked up. It was a horrible scene, and had been still more so before some one —Reuben Hernshaw, most likely—had thrown his handkerchief over the distorted face, bruised, purple, smeared with blood—a fearful and disgust-

ing sight, but to be left so—as the surgeon himself had left it, on pronouncing the man dead, quite dead—for the inquest.

Anthony Hicks's wretched life was ended—the living, breathing man of a couple of hours back, now lay a disfigured unsightly corpse on the very table he had intended for Rachel's tea-things, when he could prevail on her to become the mistress of his home. He would never come to remind her of her youth's romance more! Never again need Stephen Lockstone fear what he might know—what he might do—or Stephen Lockstone's haughty daughter need to remind him that, though she might use him as she did her gloves, her shoes, he was to expect no privilege on that account, no recognition of his services afterwards, any more than those gloves and shoes once done with and cast aside for ever.

He had passed away. His part in this world, whether badly or well played, was over. The scene was ended, the curtain dropped. No more opportunity for improvement, no change of character. He had lived—and now there remained nothing but a senseless heap of clay—an object of terror and disgust to most who looked on it. What the laws of his country required, that would be done for it—nothing more. No loving, half-broken heart would water it with tears, follow it to the grave,

and feel that all of life's brightest, dearest hopes and happiness were buried with that still beloved though lifeless form.

His death was suited to his life, and so would be all the cold, revolting forms to follow! While further than to the threshold of that other mysterious life, across which he had been sent so suddenly, so awfully, who, if they cared to do so, dare follow him even in imagination?

Some such thoughts passed through Frank Marsden's mind as he stood by the dead man's side, and looked down on his distorted, revolting features, his own blanched with mingled feelings of awe at the suddenness and terror of such a death, compassion for the miserable being who had suffered it, and a fear of who might prove the perpetrator of the terrible crime that had hurried the unprepared soul to its last final account. He turned away almost sick with the sight, and the emotions it had raised, murmuring half aloud as he did so, "As is His majesty so is His mercy," when his eye met that of poor Reuben, who had long been watching for an opportunity to attract his attention, unobserved by the crowd around.

When Deborah had returned with the surgeon, whom she had fortunately found at home, he had pronounced it a case where all aid would be of no avail, as death by violence was unmistakable; and

having listened to Reuben's account of all he knew in the matter, had advised that the proper authorities should be summoned at once, and had himself sent in one policeman met on his way home, thus following poor Hernshaw's earnest request. This man had soon gathered more of his fellows, and these, with a few stray people whom curiosity had attracted to the spot, on the first rumour of a murder having been committed, pretty well filled the little room containing the body of the wretched man.

As Frank, answering Reuben's sign, passed round it to get quietly out, his eye fell on the part of the wall he knew to be newly done up, and he shuddered to think that such a scene was enacting within a few paces of Mabel. How thankful he felt that there no longer existed that passage of communication, which would have seemed to bring it into her very presence, as it were.

Reuben, as soon as he saw Frank understood his signal, slipped quietly out of the room, and down into the garden, whither the young man soon followed him, and they stood together under the low wall which divided this slip of ground from that belonging to the house occupied by the Lees, sufficiently removed from the observation either of the people continually passing in and out—for police discipline was not so exact or prompt at Merestown in those days as it might have been—or of that of the

little fluctuating crowd at the gate who had been in, and only lingered there to give the most graphic detail in their power of the horrors they had seen to the new comers, of those who were going in and those who longed to do so, but could not wind up their courage to the necessary height.

"Mr. Marsden," Reuben began hesitatingly, "I don't exactly know, sir, as I can feel sure, but I—I don't know what to say."

"About what, my good fellow?" asked Frank kindly; for he liked all he had seen of Reuben Hernshaw much.

"Why, sir," the latter answered, "I think I know the man that came out. I didn't say so to the doctor nor the police, nor nobody, but I don't feel easy in my mind as to what's right, and I thought you'd tell me, sir."

"You mean you were afraid you ought to say whom you believe it to have been, but don't like to get the person into trouble, eh?"

"Well, it's not just that, neither, sir. I wished him into trouble enough awhile agone, but I never thought of anything as black as this."

"Oh! I see," and Frank felt still more kindly towards the good-hearted man who shrank from giving evidence that might injure an enemy. "Still I think you ought to tell. Are you sure on this point?"

"As sure as I see you this moment standing here, Mr. Marsden, in my own mind; but I was so flustered and startled like, I shouldn't like to swear to it."

"Who do you *think* it was? You wouldn't mind telling me so much, I suppose?"

No. Reuben was only too glad in circumstances of such horror he could share the terrible suspicion weighing him down with anyone he could trust, as he could Frank; so he answered at once, but in a low, awe-struck whisper, "Mr. Lockstone," and he shuddered as he uttered the name.

Frank uttered an exclamation, not altogether of astonishment, though that had some share in the tide of mingled feelings which rushed over him. How more than likely! Of course! Was not this man mixed up with that secret, of the existence of which every event, little or great, made him feel more and more convinced? He had become troublesome, and then—but how could Stephen Lockstone bring himself to such an awful crime, and so committed too? It was most horrible, and yet—yes, he felt pretty certain it was so. Reuben had told of the sounds of struggling he had heard; it might not have been altogether premeditated, but from what he now knew of the lawyer's character, he thought it likely enough that if things were as he suspected, the evil in his nature would

so grow—the terror of discovery so increase on him—it might become the master-passion, to which all else would be made subservient.

He thought of all these things rapidly; he thought also of all he knew, and Reuben did not, tending to confirm his suspicion as to the identity of the murderer; and then he said,

"It is a terrible business altogether, Mr. Hernshaw, and very painful for you, as I can well understand, but it won't do for you not to say all you think. You can tell it exactly as you have to me, as regards your amount of certainty on the point; if it is so, other things will soon come out, depend on it. But it would not be right for you to keep this first clue back. I would advise you should go at once to the nearest magistrate, and depose to all the facts you know, and add your impression as to its being Stephen Lockstone who came out of the house. I would not tell this to those ordinary constables in there; you are not called on to do that, and were wise to withhold it, I think. They are not much up to their duty," and Frank almost smiled as he thought of their London brethren, among whom he had had tolerable experience, conducting themselves, in a similar case to this, in the manner these were now doing. However, it had this advantage—that Reuben Hernshaw, well-known and highly respected by most of

them, was left to follow his own devices.

"Well, sir, I'll go if you think it best," he said reluctantly, and evidently by no means reconciled to the necessity.

"It is not only best, but absolutely necessary, my good fellow," Frank answered encouragingly; "and look here, you can just call at the house in the High Street as you pass, and see if Mr. Lockstone is returned. They were waiting for him, and had been for an hour nearly, when I left. If he has gone there you will run no risk of seeing him, and it is just as well to know something of his movements. I am going in to Mr. Lee's for a few minutes now, and then I will come to you at Mr. Hammond's. You will go to him, I conclude?"

"Yes, sir, he's nearest, and will be best, I suppose. I wish you would come with me, please," and poor Reuben looked disconsolately up into the young man's face, as the latter felt, though he could not see it, through the darkness.

"I must go to them for a minute, perhaps more. Think what a terror they must probably be in if they know this—and it is impossible but that they must know something is going on ere this—but I will be as quick as I possibly can, and if you will call in the High Street, shall very likely be at Mr. Hammond's as soon as yourself."

And then they separated, Reuben to go disconsolately into the town. He had long ago despatched his son, who had come in search of him, back to Meadowlands with the tidings of what had occurred, and the small chance there was of his getting home for some hours—Frank to hurry in to the Lees, where he was greeted by anxious, frightened, questioning looks from Mrs. Lee and Mabel, while the poor old man exclaimed impatiently,

"Frank, Frank, where have you been all this time? Mabel said you would soon come at tea-time, and now it's time for my supper, and Deborah hasn't brought it; she doesn't know what she's about any more than you do. You shouldn't leave me like this—I don't like it."

"I'm very sorry, my dear sir," Frank answered, coming up behind the armchair in which Mr. Lee was sitting, "but I could not help myself. I have a great deal of work to do, you know, sir, and, besides that, several people have been wanting me to-night."

"But I want you most of all, Frank. I've been watching for you for hours, and they've been making such a noise next door—we've heard it quite plainly, and I don't like it at all. I want you to go in and tell them they are not to do it—that I don't like it. You must tell them that,

you know, Frank, and make them stop," and the poor old man drew himself up with an attempt to look dignified, which it was very pitiful to see. Even in the best days of his manhood, dignity had never been one of this Lee's attributes. It, and the good-tempered, easy-going, boon companion, "Ned Lee," had nothing in common, thorough gentleman though he was.

"They are going to be quiet now, sir," Frank said; and, in spite of himself, there was a solemnity in his tone which drew the eyes of both ladies anxiously towards his own. He continued to quiet and soothe the old man as well as he could for a minute or so; and then, as Deborah did at last bring in his arrowroot, he took the opportunity of whispering a softened statement of the dreadful truth to Mrs. Lee.

She heard him with horror, and it was all she could do to refrain from exclaiming aloud; but she did refrain, and was ready to aid Frank in the excuses he gave to her husband for bidding him good night at once; she even called his attention to herself, while the young man drew Mabel out with him into the passage, to give her the same story, with the terribly-added interest of their being no longer any doubt of a more than suspicious connexion between the unfortunate murdered man and Stephen Lockstone.

This done, and a tender farewell taken of the trembling, frightened girl, Frank left her in Deborah's charge for further comfort, and himself hurried off to support Reuben Hernshaw in the dreaded interview with the magistrate.

The crowd in the little room at No. 4—a room made so fearfully solemn in its aspect now by that fearful presence of the unhallowed dead—was beginning to lessen, when a tall, gaunt, female figure pushed her way impatiently through the two or three still lingering about the door, and walked straight up to the table, whereon the murdered man was stretched.

She snatched off the handkerchief ruthlessly from the face, and gazed sternly down on the loathsome, distorted features. Long and silently did she gaze on a sight which would have sickened most women with terror and disgust. Not so with Rachel. Gathering what had happened from Reuben Hernshaw, when he called at the door in the High Street, she had hastily snatched her bonnet and shawl and hurried away through the streets, to look on the truth, the proof of what had occurred, for herself. Not a tear dimmed the brightness of her piercing eyes as they rested immovably on the face of the man she had once loved so dearly. No thought of that time, or, at any rate, of the emotions present to her at that time, softened her stern

gaze. As she had no pity for her own past folly in having so loved, so she had none for the wretched fate of the man who had inspired her with the passion, simply for his own purposes, his own gratification.

She lifted up a lock of the untidy, grizzled hair, which had fallen over and partly concealed the wound on the temple, from which the blood had flowed, and was still oozing slightly even now, though fast congealing, and seemed almost to gloat over the horrible sight disclosed; and then again turned her eyes to where another smaller injury had been inflicted by the sharp edge of the table as it fell. Nor did the many bruises escape her examination; she looked at each and all with a strange light in her eye, till the very policeman himself, albeit used enough to witness unusual phases of human nature, and not the least harsh exhibition of these amongst the lowest sort of women, looked at her with disapproval, and shrugging his shoulders, said,

"Well, you're pretty near as bad as a 'ospital chap hisself, Mrs. Rachel. For my part, I'm not so fond of pulling such carrion about, or looking at it, either, more than I can help."

Rachel had finished her inspection by this time, and carefully replacing the handkerchief, she answered, with a touch of feeling in her voice, but

not for the fate of the murdered man, on whose stiff form she was still gazing, as if on something which fascinated and riveted her eyes,

"I'm thinking how things come round—two and twenty years ago he gave Joel the blow that sooner or later brought him to his grave, and now look what has come to himself. He's gone now, and Joel—poor Joel went first," and with one last lingering look, she turned, and walked away far more slowly than she had come.

CHAPTER X.

THE dinner, or, rather, the half-hour bell had pealed forth from its niche in the turret over the court-yard of Lee Manor, that same Saturday evening, when Sarah Lockstone stood in the hall, having just returned from a ride with Harry Neville.

A very pleasant ride it had been. She had thrown off for a little the uncongenial wavering, the doubts that had of late troubled and oppressed her. She had resolved to await the result of her father's interview with Tony Hicks, before forming her own final determination, and she had given herself up for the interval to her old self. Never had she been so piquante, Harry thought, rarely so entirely charming, while she looked handsomer than usual; and as they galloped along over her favourite downs, the hope once more arose in his bosom that all the past gloom, the fierce repellent spirit which even he had found it hard to endure sometimes, had taken flight for ever, and that she would continue, as now, the most attractive and beautiful of her sex.

She, too, had enjoyed the scamper; it was not disagreeable to talk to Harry Neville again, with that latterly ever-present weight once more resolutely banished, for the moment, at least. They had ridden fast and far, and had barely allowed Harry the minutes necessary to reach Castle Neville in time for dinner, although that was half an hour later than Stephen Lockstone's hour.

There stood Stephen Lockstone's daughter now, her cheeks flushed from exercise, her brilliant eyes, more brilliant than ever, her proud lips curled, but with something of a smile on them. She looked unusually beautiful; there could be no doubt of that, and, more unusual still, almost genuinely happy for the minute. Her mood was broken in on by her mother's weak, gentle voice, half frightened as usual, calling, in a sort of whisper from the landing,

"Is that Miss Lockstone, Barnes, please, or your master?"

"Me, mama; and as I came as I went, on horseback, not in a carriage, I wonder you had any need to ask the question," and throwing her whip on the table, she came quickly up the stairs.

"Oh! Sarah, your father's not home yet!" said poor, fragile Mrs. Lockstone, clasping her little

thin weak hands together, and looking very despairingly on the handsome face coldly regarding hers.

"Well, mama, did such a phenomenon as a man's being late for his dinner never occur before?"

"But he is always so—so uncomfortable when he is late," said the wife, with a little shiver.

Sarah laughed.

"You choose mild terms, mama. You mean, I suppose, that when his cowardice has kept him away from this place beyond the proper hour, he returns rather more like a baulked hyena than usual."

And as the wan face of Mrs. Lockstone twitched convulsively while her daughter spoke, showing how great was her dread of the pleasant state of mind described, a shadow of compassion flitted over the scornful face.

"Never mind, mama. You will not have to bear the whole brunt of the encounter. I have a matter to discuss with him when he does come; and no doubt part of the bravado, so carefully hoarded for home consumption, when it might do good service elsewhere, will be expended in our interview."

Poor Mrs. Lockstone gave a sigh of relief, and looking half fearfully, half fondly—for the poor

woman had still that mother's love for her offspring when she dared show it, which is rarely quite extinguished or outlived—she ventured to say,

"Oh! Sarah, how can you bear it?—I wish I could help you, but I cannot—I cannot!" and she sadly shook her head.

Sarah laughed aloud, but though even more contemptuously than usual, there was a dash of kindliness mixed with it, which was as sweet as it was unusual to her mother's ear.

"Pray, mama, confine all your efforts at endurance to yourself. I am sure you need more than you can muster," she said, and proceeded upstairs to get ready for dinner.

Poor Mrs. Lockstone's life had become day by day a greater burden to her since their removal to Lee Manor. Her dread of doing or saying something glaringly unsuited to the position in which she very unwillingly found herself, and so anger her daughter, was only less than the ever-increasing terror of her husband, which, as he grew more and more morose, was become a mortal fear, wearing away slowly, but surely, the very springs of her life. With no occupation either in her house or out of it to take away her thoughts, or divert them, even for a time, from the one well-worn channel of dread as to what the man who had sworn to love and cherish her would do or say

next, the fear of him was becoming, if it had not already become, a monomania, and a constitution never very strong originally, was giving way fast beneath the continual pressure of the mind's ceaseless anxiety on the body's health. Mrs. Lockstone had grown to be almost as much a shadow as those with which her imagination was continually terrifying itself; and though those around her neither saw nor thought of the existence of danger, it needed very little to terminate the frail existence which had been one long misery for eighteen years or more.

"Well, mama, as I intend dining to-day, whether you think it right to fast in compliment to the absence of your husband or not, perhaps you will favour me by ordering dinner," and as Sarah spoke she rang the bell.

It was more than half an hour past the usual dinner hour, and Stephen Lockstone had not yet returned. So long his daughter had consented to wait with tolerable patience; she had an amusing book of Harry Neville's, and wished to finish it that evening. Now, however, she proceeded to dine, carrying her trembling, anxious, doubting mother with her.

A very silent meal it was, served with all the style and appliances suited to the dwellers in such a house as the Manor; but Sarah was

really hungry, and had, besides, almost ceased to whet the edge of her satire on the poor, frightened, humble woman, who could afford so little amusement in return, while as for that weak lady herself, she sat listening anxiously for the sound of wheels she yet dreaded to hear, trembling, starting at the slightest unusual noise, now looking covertly at Sarah, and if caught in the act, apologising for the liberty by a mute glance of appeal, now gazing round the room, as though she expected to see her terrible husband start from behind some of the old picture frames—those highly-prized treasures of art of the Lees—all the time pretending to eat, lest she should be called to account by Sarah, while feeling as if every mouthful she attempted to swallow would choke her.

The meal was over at last. How Sarah could drink her wine and eat her grapes and peaches so composedly, her poor mother could not think! What would her father say if he came in? He was always so terribly cross. The oaths he poured forth were always so deep, so much more horrible when he came in late—detained by something that vexed him, she supposed. Yes, poor, weary, worn-out victim of a long-suffering wife, something did vex him ever, when he delayed his return so long to the roof he had perilled so much to gain—the home it

had been the object of his life to acquire; and that something was his own fear, the almost insane terror of he knew not what, with which his conscience had tormented him ever since he had taken possession of his old master's ancestral home.

As his violence made her life one perpetual fear, so did the shadow of possible consequences make his at times almost the same; and thus it had happened more than once or twice, that he had literally dreaded to return to the house he had coveted so strongly, and when at length he had desperately overcome the shadowy terror sufficiently to do so, it was with such impotent rage against himself as could find vent and relief only in invective and abuse against the one being now remaining in his family whom he could venture so to attack, or who was in the least degree moved by his violence.

Mrs. Lockstone sat silent, poring over and over again in her mind what would happen when he came home, and, as is often the habit of nervous over-wrought minds, living over and over again in imagination the very scene she most dreaded, and would have given anything she possessed to escape from; wondering again at Sarah's imperturbable composure—almost envying her. She seemed to like those walnuts, and to care about them just as much as if no Stephen Lockstone existed! How could she do it? How could she en-

dure his looks, his language? Ah! she did not care about it—it took no effect on her, and the poor woman sighed deeply, pitifully, and at the next moment bounded in sudden terror from her chair at Sarah's unexpectedly suggesting they should return to the drawing-room.

They did so, and tea was brought and drank, but still no Stephen Lockstone came; and by-and-bye his miserable wife, from fits and starts of trembling, began to quiver and shake continuously, to such a pitch of nervous dread had her ceaseless anticipation of the coming terrors brought her. Sarah looked up from her book as a movement of the chair on which her mother sat attracted her attention; and observing her condition, said, raising her eyebrows at the same moment in intense, involuntary scorn of the fear she could not understand or feel,

"You'd better go to bed, mama, I should think, before you are quite incapable of getting there."

"But—but what will he say, Sarah?" stammered Mrs. Lockstone.

"Nothing at all to you, mama, in that case; probably I shall have a good deal to say to him before he goes to bed, therefore I believe you will escape for to-night."

Doubtful, dreading, but obedient, the poor shadow of Stephen Lockstone's once beautiful bride

retired, and her daughter was left alone to await his return. As to Sarah, she had given but a passing thought to this unusual delay. Some of his ordinary folly connected with that man Hicks probably, and so she dismissed it from her mind. It was not her habit, as she had once observed to Harry Neville, to waste either her tongue or her brains in unprofitable conjectures on matters they could by no possibility ascertain, and which would in due time be disclosed by the natural course of events.

Another half-hour or so passed away, when Sarah's attention was attracted by unusual sounds from that part of the house leading to the servants' offices. She laid down her book and listened. Yes, there was not the slightest doubt of it—there was a subdued hubbub of many voices all speaking together. For a minute or two more she listened. Were the servants, weary of waiting, come out of the servants' hall, and amusing themselves in some way or other in the passages ? or was there something out of the common exciting their interest ?

She had almost resolved to go and see, when rapid steps were heard approaching, almost in a run, as it appeared to her. The door was flung violently open, and one of the footmen, his face white with terror, and his eyes looking well-nigh scared out of his head, burst into the room, and rushed

half-way across it, when, meeting Sarah's eyes fixed calmly, questioningly upon him, he stopped suddenly, and gazed on her in return, his mouth wide open, and his hands held helplessly out.

"Well, fool, what is the meaning of this buffoonery?" Sarah asked haughtily, after a moment's pause.

"Some—some—men—Miss," stammered the man.

"What men, and where?"

"Here—here, Miss, do—wnstairs."

"Upstairs, I should imagine, by the noise you have all been making. What do they want?"

"M—m—master, Miss."

"Then you might as well have sent them away at once. You know he is not at home."

The man did not answer this time, but stood gazing at her with the same terrified, bewildered expression on his face, while the sounds in the distance, still more audible through the open door, seemed to grow louder and more confused.

"Can't you speak, sir? Why haven't you sent these people away?—and what do they want?"

"They say that they must—must——"

And here the man—who had not been very long in the Lockstones' service, was a stranger to the place, and regarded the whole family as yet with the sort of awe and reverence a young servant does

feel towards those living in a style his highest flights of imagination could never have realised as possible while a boy in the cottage at home—fairly stopped short again.

Sarah repeated her question more angrily—in vain. This time she got no answer at all, and, impatiently rising, was going out of the room to inquire for herself into the disturbance, when the lad pulled her dress, and said beseechingly,

"Don't go, Miss!"

Sarah looked in his face, and read there a sort of pity mingled with his terror. She smiled haughtily, contemptuously, and with an impatient "Pshaw!" proceeded on her way. She was soon amid the whole bevy of servants. Grooms, scullery-maid, butler, housekeeper, all and everyone were there, to the very boy last admitted as stable-helper—all assembled, a terrified, staring, bewildered group, round two or three men, who were strangers to Sarah, but looked full of mysterious importance and authority. She looked scornfully round the group of servants, and then fixed her eyes steadily on the strangers.

"What is it that you want," she inquired, "that you come disturbing the household at this hour of the night?"

"We want Mr. Lockstone, ma'am, and must have him," replied one of the men, respectfully, but firmly.

"Mr. Lockstone is not at home, as the servants might have told you," answered Sarah; but she began herself to wonder at their pertinacity.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, but you must allow us to judge of that for ourselves," returned the man, who seemed to be the chief among them.

"What do you mean, fellow?" Sarah answered, haughtily, fixing her eyes on him with a look before which Stephen Lockstone himself had often quailed.

The man did not, but, like the servant, returned the gaze with a sort of pity, mingled with respect. Sarah's beauty could not be looked on unmoved by many people. The look irritated her, however, and she said, impatiently,

"Be good enough to explain yourself, if you please."

The man, however, did not speak at once, but after a moment's hesitation, during which she flashed on him a look hard to withstand, replied,

"I don't disbelieve you, ma'am, for a moment, but we must search the house, if you please."

For a single instant Sarah's thoughts flew back to the contents of a paper safely locked in her desk upstairs; but, no, that was in her possession. What new folly did this portend?

"Who are you, and on what authority do you presume to say this?" she demanded, very quietly,

but with a tone not pleasant to listen to, unless the listener were quite sure of his ground.

In this case he was, and replied promptly, as he saw there was nothing for it but explanation. "She would have it, and so she got it, beauty as she was!" as he afterwards observed to his companions.

"I'm a constable, ma'am, and I've a warrant from Squire Hammond to take the person of Stephen Lockstone, of High Street, Merestown, and this place, commonly known as Lee Manor, into custody."

"Indeed! Pray do your duty, but first have the goodness to inform me on what charge this warrant was issued?"

There was another pause—a deeper one than before. A hush seemed to fall on every one in that pale-faced group. The very constables themselves looked down, as though willing to evade, if possible, answering not only the words addressed to them, but those brilliant, questioning eyes, which seemed as though they could burn their way into their minds, and read the answer for themselves.

Sarah glanced round. There was something, then—something serious, probably, though, as she believed, only in suspicion, not in fact. Well, her own line would not be a difficult one to decide on,

at any rate. Only know she would and must.

"If you are not capable of answering me, my good man, be good enough to show me the warrant."

The man still stood silent, immovable, thinking what he had best do, and she again impatiently repeated,

"Tell me on what charge this warrant is issued. On some absurd suspicion, I have no doubt, but on what? Speak, man, if you've not lost the power—what is the charge?"

"Murder!"

The word burst forth, sending an electric thrill through every one but her who might be supposed most shocked at its import. The others had heard it before, but it came forth now sharp and ringing, the one solitary, terrible word, as though the man would fain have kept it back, but could not.

A short silence followed; then Sarah asked, with a bitter smile on her haughty lip,

"And of whom? Pray make this improbable story complete. Of whom?"

This time the constable put the warrant into her hands, and as she read the name of Anthony Hicks, her heart did for one moment seem to stand still, though the next it bounded on again with double force. What folly!

"Really! This is a better story than I could have believed it possible to fabricate in so short a

time," she said, after returning the paper. "So a respectable gentleman is charged with the murder of a wretched old clerk, to whom he was in the habit of giving occasional alms. I suppose he must have grudged the shillings so bestowed!" and she laughed her scornful laugh. "On what grounds was this accusation made?"

The constable hesitated.

"Well, ma'am, the man is dead, of that there is no doubt, and I believe Mr. Lockstone was seen coming out of the house a minute or so before Mr. Hernshaw found the body."

"Who found the body?"

"Mr. Hernshaw, of Meadowlands, ma'am."

"And where?"

"In the murdered man's own house, ma'am."

"And who supposed they saw Mr. Lockstone leaving it?"

"Mr. Hernshaw, I believe, ma'am; but I'm not quite certain as to the particklars. We were none of us there, and came off the minute we had the warrant, without hearing more than just so much, and I can't answer exactly to its being just the very thing."

"I should imagine not," Sarah answered haughtily. "Very well. Pray search the house from garret to cellar, if you will, and should you find Mr. Lockstone let me know."

So saying, she walked back with erect head and stately step into the drawing-room.

The men, of course, failed to find Stephen Lockstone in his own house; but they found his unhappy wife, and scared her almost to death on the spot, though, in compassion for her weakness and terror, the real facts of the case were concealed from her by both her own maid and the constables. She was easier to manage than Sarah, and very far from insisting on being told anything.

Meantime her daughter, the book still in her hands, but her busy thoughts very far away from it, sat brooding over what she had heard. That her father had really murdered Tony Hicks, she did not for one moment believe. He had not the courage, she thought; but that some unfortunate catastrophe had happened in which her father's folly, as she termed it, had mixed him up, was very clear. The question was now, What had occurred, and where was her father? She did not choose to go into Merestown to inquire. That would give a colouring to the supposition that she believed the charge, and she might be asked questions it were prudent to avoid, since, answer as she might, harm would probably arise from her ignorance, and under that ignorance she sat and chafed!

Why had her father not come or sent to her at once? Well, it was part and parcel of his usual ab-

surdity of conduct now. Knowing himself less capable than ever, of acting with any sort of judgment where his craven fears were concerned, he had probably taken some most unreasonable step, and this was the result.

Things were all hurrying on to a climax, at any rate. What would that climax be? Was hers, after all, not to be the overruling hand? Was it "too late" for her too?—No—that could not be. At least, she believed so. She would go to Meadowlands to-morrow morning and see Reuben Hernshaw herself. No harm could come of that, at all events.

The quiet Sunday morning rose still and peaceful, the autumn hush in the air unbroken even by the distant call of the carters to their horses, which usually, on the six other mornings of the week, told of life, and stir, and labour, as it came heavily through the misty veil, which often, at that season, hid all sight of them from any but a near view. Sarah was up very early; but there was a satisfactory, ostensible reason for that, in the fact that her mother's maid had called her up on account of that meek lady's increasing illness.

Breakfast over at an hour which by no means suited the strict ideas of "haristocratic" propriety entertained by the London butler Stephen Lockstone had enthroned over his household at the

Manor, she sent for her own groom, and despatched him into Merestown for the medical man who had been in the habit of attending their family, and, as he was leaving the room, she added carelessly,

"And by the way, Robert, just call at the house in the High Street, and ask why the carriage did not come home last night. Unless your master left very particular orders about it, they had better bring it over to-day."

The man bowed, and set off on his mission, and Sarah immediately started on her walk to Meadowlands. As she crossed the sweep before the door, the church bells broke forth with their matin peal, sending the sweet musical sound of their full tones clearly across the park, telling of rest and peace, holiness, devotion, and hope. Sarah started involuntarily as the first chime fell on her ears, and then with an impatient gesture, hurried on her way. Her mind was not attuned to the thoughts those bells suggested, and she was fain to close it to their intrusion, so far as was possible.

The mist that morning was very thick, and not one breath of air was stirring to raise the damp canopy shrouding trees, hedges, pathway, every object from view. Sarah could not see half across the field she was traversing, while the thick dew lay heavy and wet on the long grass hanging lazily over either side of the pathway, like the green drip-

ping tresses of a mermaid. It was not a pleasant morning for a walk; the oak trees under which she now and then passed dropped a wet shower of their brown leaves over her as some imperceptible shiver ran through their stately forms, unmoved though they were by any breeze, however slight.

Not even the sweet song of the bright-eyed robin, which now and again broke the oppressive silence enfolding all nature animate and inanimate, could cheer that walk, though the voice of the little songster seemed to express the very essence of happiness.

By the time she reached the pleasant farm Sarah's face was very stern, and the rosy-cheeked damsel who answered her impatient summons at the rarely-used front door, was almost too terrified by such an unlooked-for apparition to answer her inquiries for Mr. Hernshaw articulately. However, Sarah at length understood he was at home, and not long after found herself confronting him in the stiff best parlour. He looked remarkably uncomfortable and distressed, with a face that had not yet recovered the yesterday's shock; she, trebly imperious and unbending, regarded him as though she would penetrate the inmost recesses of his heart. Returning his salutation haughtily, Sarah began at once.

"I am come, Mr. Hernshaw, to request you will

be good enough to tell me exactly all you know of this most extraordinary business. The men who came last night to the Manor in search of Mr. Lockstone seemed perfectly ignorant of all the facts—almost, as it appeared to me, of their own business. They told me that some miserable man had been found dead, and that you having seen my father leaving the house where he was found, an absurd suspicion had arisen that he was in some way connected with the death. I came here myself this morning to request you to tell me all that you know of this, and I beg you will do so as shortly as possible. Mrs. Lockstone is extremely unwell, and I am desirous to be at home again before the doctor, who has been sent for, arrives."

As she spoke Sarah felt some gratitude towards her unfortunate mother. For once in her life she could be made useful—one of her actions, however involuntarily, could further her daughter's objects.

This illness was a good excuse for any steps it might be necessary for Sarah to take, and would cover the real motives actuating her own proceedings.

Poor Reuben was sorely troubled in his honest mind; he felt very sorry for the beautiful girl before him, though he could not, as he expressed it to Mary, "take a fancy to her nohow, young and handsome as she was." She seemed to stand there

as a judge—a composed sifter of evidence, impartial, unmoved—not like a girl whose father was charged, on however doubtful evidence, with the foulest, blackest crime that can stain the annals of human sin.

He, like the constable, tried to fence a little at first, but it would not do, and at last he gave her a detailed and particular account of all he knew, had seen, and heard. Sarah listened to him, silent and attentive to the end, and when he had finished, said,

"So you are not even sure it was Mr. Lockstone who came out of the house?"

Reuben hesitated. He could have answered her as he did Frank Marsden, but he did not like.

"I'd rather not swear to it," he said at last.

"And yet, on a mere fancy of yours, that a person you saw in a very equivocal position in the dusk was Mr. Lockstone, a warrant for murder is granted against one of the richest landed proprietors in the county. If it were not for the annoyance of the thing, Mr. Hernshaw, one could almost laugh at its absurdity."

Reuben looked down, and was silent.

"What is known of this person who is said to be murdered?"

"Not very much, ma'am, I believe; I never saw him before."

"What is known?" repeated Sarah imperiously, who saw that the good farmer had answered more evasively than truly; "tell me, if you please."

"Well, ma'am, nobody seems to know very much of him. A good many people have seen him often enough, but they don't know more than that he was a drunken sort of a body."

"Well?"

"And—and last night," continued poor Reuben in despair, as he listened to the impatient command of the tone in which that questioning adverb was uttered, "it was said, Miss, that he was an old clerk of Mr. Lockstone's many years ago."

"Really! Well, I believe even I knew as much as that; and so, because this miserable, drunken old man comes to a violent death, and is found to have been once a clerk of my father's, no more probable explanation of his death can be found than that he murdered him! What motive for so probable a proceeding is assigned, pray, to make the tale complete; some such there must be?" and she looked keenly at him as she spoke.

"I don't know, ma'am, I never heard one talked of," and Hernshaw spoke truthfully, looking rather struck by this view of the case, which had not occurred to himself, for Frank had carefully refrained from breathing a word of what little he knew, and of all he suspected on the subject.

"It is a pity such a little omission should exist," Sarah said, scornfully. "On my word, I think magistrates should be somewhat more careful on what ground they issue warrants in such a case."

"It is a very terrible affair altogether, ma'am," Reuben said, dismally; he certainly wished very earnestly his own share in it had been less even than it was.

"It has been made so, no doubt," she returned, with emphasis; "for my own part, I see nothing either terrible or extraordinary, though it may be sad, in a drunken man falling over his own table, and getting a blow which caused his death. It is not the first casualty of the sort, and probably will not be the last."

Again her words impressed the honest, single-minded farmer. What if this had been the case? It was not an impossible explanation of the matter. How unfortunate was he to have given such evidence; and when Sarah released him from her cross-examination, and bid him good morning, she left poor Reuben in a very perplexed and still more troubled state of mind than she had found him in, though that was by no means an enviable one.

Sarah did not walk home quite so rapidly. She had much food for meditation. There was more in the story than she had at first believed,

but not quite all that was suspected. She felt almost sure of that; and if nothing more transpired than Reuben Hernshaw knew, all was, and probably would be well. Tony had very likely been difficult to deal with, had been intoxicated, turned altogether rusty, and might even have offered violence to his old master, and so the thing had come about; and she knitted her brows as she thus thought. Why could not Stephen Lockstone have had the man at his own office, as he ought? Fool!—fool! Ever undoing his own hardly-achieved work with his own hands!—by his own cowardly acts! And she stamped her foot in impatient anger as she walked. Scandal there must and would be, that was unavoidable—open, most disagreeable scandal. If nothing worse, that was unpleasant enough, and her cheeks burned scarlet as she thought of the Countess of Avonsdale's expression when she heard of the matter, the raising of the eyebrows, the measured tones of astonishment; and then she could have beaten herself for caring one jot about how she looked, and what she said—why should she?—why did she? It was time something had happened to stop all this foolery, to restore her to herself. She had not been like Sarah Lockstone lately—it was high time she resumed her proper character. And feeling harder and colder-hearted than she had felt for many a

day, she went on her way, unheeding all outward objects, engrossed in her own thoughts.

She had reached the narrow green lane, which, besides the cross line from the Manor House to Meadowlands, had two other turnings branching off, the one to a wild bit of country on the other side of the Manor property, the other leading by a circuitous route to Merestown, when she was roused by a strange sort of cry, that seemed to cleave through the misty air with its wild, sharp ring. She had been so lost in her own musings, that, coming as it did, suddenly, in the midst of the heavy, oppressive silence round, it startled her. She stopped and listened. What could it be? Pshaw! What an idiot she was!—a stray dog out hunting. Ah! there it was again. Yes, it was a dog, and she was going on again, when her quick ears detected the patter of some animal's feet rapidly approaching through the dense mist. She could hear it quite plainly, but could see nothing; and though no fear had ever found even a temporary home in Sarah Lockstone's breast, her heart did beat a little quicker, as the regular thud, thud, on the soft turf came nearer and nearer, and there was yet no possibility of discerning what produced the sound. She strained her eyes in vain, for the fog had increased rather than lessened, and there was no chance of distinguishing anything a yard or two beyond the

spot where she stood. She listened again, and fancied she could catch the sound of panting, as well as that of feet, indicating that some creature was approaching her. It could not be a human being, and yet it was no pointer, nothing half as small could come along with so much speed and weight. And now something was looming out of the mist, something dark and heavy; and while she was yet uncertain who or what it could be, the creature was upon her with one bound.

So violent was the shock Sarah received, that it was with difficulty she kept her ground, but she did so, putting her arm out at the same time to ward off any possible attack from the animal that had come on her so strangely. There was no need, for a very pitiful, prolonged whine followed this greeting, and the next moment Charon stood at her feet, looking up into her face with eyes full of expression and entreaty.

For a moment she felt inclined to chastise the dog; but he whined again more piteously than before, almost ending the prolonged cry in a howl, so that he was evidently aware of the extent of his delinquency. She remembered now he had followed her unheeded in the morning—no doubt he had gone on some unpermitted voyage of discovery of his own, and now, on rejoining her at last, was meekly confessing his sin and asking pardon.

She let him have it, for she had never missed him, had been indifferent to his absence or presence. Her head was full of other things; but for which he might not have escaped so easily, either for his forsaking her in the first instance, or for the almost fright he had given her now. As it was, he might go; so, after a word of reproof, she went on followed by the faithful dog, ever and again repeating the plaintive cry, and pulling at her dress; but she was too intent on her own cogitations to attend to any repetition of his appeal once answered.

CHAPTER XI.

SUNDAY was always a very quiet day at No. 5, Newman's Buildings. Mabel and Deborah, or, rather, of late, as it had been, Mabel and Frank, went to church together in the morning. If the day was fine enough, they as often as not wandered away to one of the villages within reach. Mabel liked the quiet little country churches far better than the one great edifice in Merestown, fine in itself, originally beautiful, but spoiled by the self-glorifying additions of many successive church-wardens, and with a clergyman who saw no detriment in these either to the beauty of the church itself, or to the fitness of things connected with it.

Merestown was no less backward than its fellows in those days, as to the various parts of church worship being done "decently and in order." There was always a great crowd of smartly-dressed people who frequented morning church, a great proportion of whom seemed to imagine that being there, they had done all that could reasonably be expected of them, and were at perfect

liberty to use their senses as they best pleased, particularly that of sight, while poor old Mr. Corbett droned out the prayers, stumbled over the lessons, and prosed through a homily which might have been better had he not attempted to improve it with original additions. Accordingly, they stared at each other, as though to see and be seen were the principal object which had assembled them together; and poor Mabel, as a young and pretty girl, had received more than her fair share of these attentions, the few times she had been compelled to give up those much-looked-forward-to country walks, and content herself with parading to All Saints; and she shrank from their endurance as one of the greatest of the petty trials of her life.

"It will be almost too foggy for you this morning, darling," Mrs. Lee had observed, the Sunday morning after that terrible Saturday night, as she walked to the little window after breakfast and looked out on the wintry atmosphere, which certainly did look more and more like a thick fog as it neared the town.

"Yes, Miss Mabel," chimed in Deborah, who was clearing away the things, her face still bearing witness to the shock of the previous night; "it's downright wet out of doors; you'll a'most want an umbrella to get to Merestown even."

Mabel cast an appealing look at Frank, who had

been sitting grave and abstracted during the chief part of their meal, but had attended to these remarks affecting his own and Mabel's movements. He joined Mrs. Lee at the window, and said,

"It was not so very bad as I came out; and the other way will improve at every step, I expect —if Mabel does not mind a little damp, I think we may venture."

Mrs. Lee smiled, and glanced from one young face to the other.

"You both want to go the longer walk—that is the real fact, I suspect; and would conjure this damp November mist into bright sunshine, if you could."

"Certainly, if I had the power," Frank answered, returning her smile; "and now, Mabel, if you like to venture as far as Elmdale, you had better get ready—it begins at half-past ten, you know."

Mabel's simple toilette did not take very long, and they were soon on their way—as soon, that is, as her father would release her. She always went to say good-bye to him ready dressed, and prayer-book in hand, or he would not have realised that she had gone to church, and have wearied his wife and Deborah with inquiries, wonders, and lamentations. But having seen her, fondly stroked her fair hair, which fell, as was the fashion of the

period, in long curls from under her hat, taken her prayer-book, looked at it, and murmured over and over, "I used to go to church, Mabel—when I go back, I shall go to church again, shan't I?" he was perfectly contented, and even patient, till the time when she was likely to be home again drew very near.

This morning he detained her longer than usual, adding to his ordinary formula, the old question,

"When shall I go back, Mabel?—I want to go back home."

Mabel fondly soothed and comforted him, assuring him that they should very soon go away now. What a comfort it was to be able to tell him that—to feel the full truth of it herself. Back to the Manor they might not go—she had herself given up all hope of that long ago; but away from Newman's Buildings they should go, and the time was not so very far distant, as she thought, with a blush and a smile on her once more radiant face.

But the face grew pale, a shudder passed over her slight frame as they turned out of their own gate, and her eyes rested on the half-closed shutter and the drawn curtain of the next door. It was near enough to be visible even through the mist, and the silence in the air seemed to brood more oppressively on that house, with the solemn,

terrible presence within it, than elsewhere. Frank saw the change in her expression and the involuntary shiver, and drew her arm closely and fondly within his own.

"My poor darling, it was a fearful shock for you —so near. I was thinking of you half the night."

"I did not sleep much, Frank—not at all till nearly morning—but I had no terror of—of being so close to it all; I was only thinking of that wretched man, and what he must feel now. I could not get him out of my head all night. Oh! Frank, I cannot think he could commit so horrible a crime!"

Frank was silent on that point. He himself hardly knew what to think, but he feared it was very possible that in fear and desperation Stephen Lockstone might be guilty of any crime. He only said,

"It will be difficult to prove the truth, whatever that may be."

"Poor mamma was more terrified than I was, I think, and Deborah does not look like herself yet. I was so afraid that papa might notice her, that it made me try more to forget all the horrors of it myself, as far as I could, to be as much as possible as usual to him."

Frank had guessed as much, and had admired the resolution and unselfish affection which had

enabled her to conquer so successfully the emotions naturally excited by such a shock in a young girl's mind. The trembling hand had alone betrayed something of what she was feeling, though, as he now looked fondly down on her, he could trace some signs of a sleepless night and past agitation in the sweet, pure face, calm and content, though it now looked back into his.

"Let us forget the subject for a time, dearest," he said. "It will be good for both of us. I have pondered over possible, improbable results, till I have well-nigh lost my common sense among a chaos of imaginary hopes and fears; and you will, I am quite sure, be the better for living only in the immediate present for an hour or so."

"I think my walk will do me good, Frank—how grateful I always feel to you for its proposal!"

"For originally instituting and establishing the custom, you mean," said Frank, laughing. "I felt very audacious when I did so, do you know, and half feared your mother's consent, even with Deborah for our body-guard."

It was during Frank's first professional visits to the Lees that these expeditions to country churches had first commenced.

"Oh! mamma was only too glad of the opportunity it gave me of getting a real country walk, and very grateful to you for the idea."

"Ah! she did not know how guilty I was, and how guilty I felt myself, for it was only the hope of having pleasant country rambles and tête-à-têtes with you, Mabel, that suggested it to me, though I hardly dared confess as much to myself at the time, and only the dread of its occurring to her made me realize my own temerity, I believe;" and so, with the talk so pleasant to lovers, the oft-recalled incidents ever repeated with new zest, and listened to with the same, and all those details so absorbingly interesting to those whose hearts are one, the two proceeded on their road to Elmdale.

The mist was unfelt, unthought of by them; the harmony and peace in their hearts brought sunshine enough to dispel it, or, at any rate, any of those physical effects it might have had on less favoured mortals. Mabel might have wished to see her favourite view towards the heath as they passed the Castle Neville turning, in lieu of the hazy screen that made it hard to be quite sure whether that was the beginning of the common, or only one of the Stanford lanes; but it was but a passing regret, hardly worthy the term; and the sun might come out by-and-by, and they should very likely have a delightful walk home.

And so they reached the quiet little churchyard of Elmdale as the bell was tolling in, and stood

for a second or two beneath the large old wooden porch, with its slanting roof and quaintly-carved finishes to its supporting beams, and watched the late village stragglers come up the path, just as one faint gleam of watery autumn sunlight dispersed the mist for a minute or so, and lighted up the old yew that stretched its protecting arms above the grassy mounds where past generations were quietly, peacefully sleeping beneath their shade.

And then they slipped noiselessly in, and took their favourite seat, an open bench not far from the door, which no one else ever seemed to patronize, except one blind old man and his grandchild. Mabel liked being near them, she had a fellow-feeling with the rosy-faced black-haired little girl who watched the wrinkled face so tenderly, while she felt mingled compassion and respect towards the patriarch himself, to whose originally finely-cut features, the patient endurance for many years of the affliction that had fallen on him in the full strength of his manhood had given a refinement and expression above his station. She often felt her own devotion helped by a glance at the placid face, on which reverence, awe, and rapt attention were so plainly written.

It was a pretty little church, that of Elmdale, and boasted, or rather might have boasted, had it

been given to that sort of thing, a simple, earnest, parish priest, who knew the duties he had willingly, joyfully, but with humility taken on himself with his ordination vows, and strove with all his might to fulfil them to the best of his ability.

One beautiful painted window above the altar memorialised the great trial and sorrow of his life —his wife's death; she was sleeping beneath it in the churchyard outside, leaving to her husband but the sad, yet cherished memory of one year's happiness—too perfect, perhaps, for earth, and a daughter, a girl who had now grown up into the image of what her mother had been when wooed and won by her still sorrowing husband. Sorrowing, but with a chastened, hopeful sorrow, that well fitted him for the perfect discharge of one of the great privileges of his office, the visiting and comforting the mourning and afflicted.

Miss Raynham was a good musician, and as her father had been, in his youth, connected with a cathedral town, they had some very fair music, and a tolerable choir, even at Elmdale—a most uncommon thing for a country church in those days, and one which might have caused some little scandal and annoyance in the neighbourhood, but for the humility and unostentatious bearing of the Rector, and the love and respect almost universally entertained for him.

To Mabel and Frank, the good though simple singing at Elmdale was a treat, and to Mabel's old blind friend a positive happiness; as he once observed to her, it made him always think—

"If boys and girls and people could sing like that on earth, in praise of their Creator, what must the angels and the saints do in heaven!"

Mabel sometimes thought in somewhat the same fashion, and to-day the solemn sounds were most soothing to her. They came out from the service, if not happier than they went in, at any rate quite as happy, and braced and strengthened for whatever might await them of fresh trial and sorrow in the future.

The sun had been having as brave a battle with the mist as his waning November strength would allow. And though he had not conquered altogether, yet he had succeeded in dispersing it in some degree, and showing himself at intervals, so that the walk back was very much more beautiful, and full of lights and shadows; and the two young spirits enjoyed it thoroughly.

They were already within a short distance of the town, and the outline of Newman's Buildings could be dimly seen, when, just across their path, came dashing Dr. Armsdaile's carriage. He caught sight of them, and pulled the check string.

"Well," he said, as they walked up to the door,

in answer to his impatient beckoning, "been to church, I suppose. Like the young lads and lassies, eh? you 'walk together.'"

And he smiled a half-grim smile, for the Doctor did not look happy.

Mabel blushed, Frank laughed, and asked if he were not coming to see them, as usual.

"Not yet," he replied, "I hope to do so this evening. I want to have a talk with you, Master Frank; but I'm not sure now when it will be. I might ask you to jump in and drive with me, cruel as it would be to leave the little lady to walk a couple of hundred yards alone, but for where I am now bound."

"Where is that?" asked Frank, not at all afraid the good old man would really carry him off, whatever his destination.

Dr. Armsdaile looked graver than ever, as he answered, after a moment's pause—

"To the Manor. Yes, Mabel, I did vow once I would never cross the threshold again, as long as those people were in it. But human creatures should not make such vows—so surely as they do, occasion arises when it were greater sin to keep than to break them."

And the poor Doctor looked gloomy.

"What is the matter, then?" asked Frank, eagerly.

"I don't know exactly. Dr. Bennet has been called to some difficult case miles away, and Mr. Carter, these people's doctor, sent to me just now. The note came exactly as I got in from my first round, to beg, as a great favour, that I would go over as soon as possible, to see Mrs. Lockstone. The matter was very serious, and he did not know what to do in it. He didn't say that, of course," and again the Doctor smiled grimly; "but that was the real English of what he did say—the meaning of his words."

"Poor woman," said Mabel, shuddering again, "how I pity her! Pray go at once, dear Doctor, and do all you can for her."

"Ah! Mabel, I can *not* 'minister to a mind diseased' any more than my professional brothers, and I suppose that is the real thing. She's not a bad sort of woman, is she, Frank? I wanted to ask you about my patient before I see her."

Young Marsden coloured. He had taken very little more notice of poor Mrs. Lockstone than it was the fashion of her family to bestow upon her, though ever scrupulously polite and attentive when occasion required. It was among the many sins of his days passed in fooldom, of which he often felt ashamed, and rarely more so than at the present moment.

"I am afraid I cannot tell you so much about

her as perhaps I ought to be able to do," he said. "She always seemed to me a quiet, meek person, without much character; but I may be mistaken."

"No, I daresay you're not, though I've no doubt you hardly knew there was such a person in the house. I understand—she's a nonentity, poor woman! Exactly. Drive on, James," and the Doctor rolled away, leaving Frank and Mabel standing in the middle of the road, without farther leave-taking.

"I cannot imagine a more bitter trial," said Mabel presently, after they had regained the footway and were walking on. "The sin of one very dear must be the hardest sorrow of all—and such a sin as this! Poor, poor woman!"

"I am no judge—at least, no good judge, as I said before, Mabel; but I cannot help thinking she does not feel it in the way you, my dearest, are picturing. Indeed, to feel real love for such a being as Stephen Lockstone must be impossible, I should say."

"Those who love him do not see him as we do, Frank; and even he may have redeeming qualities. I remember liking him tolerably well as a child, though how I could do so I cannot imagine now."

"The force of habit. You had been used to him, as you might be to a venomous snake before you knew its dangerous properties, or were old

enough to suspect their existence. You could not like him now, if you saw him as a stranger for the first time. In the best days of our intercourse it was always a struggle with me not to hate him. It's the one redeeming proof of that time that my senses were there, though not exercised, which is always a comfort to me to remember," Frank said smiling, as he held open the gate for her to pass in.

Poor Reuben Hernshaw went to church that morning in a very troubled frame of mind, and poor little Polly had some grounds for the complaint she afterwards made confidentially to her next brother and chief playfellow Johnny, that "father was so queer; hardly spoke to her at all all the way home, wasn't a bit funny, and never gathered her one blackberry, though she saw two or three late bunches in one hedge, and Johnny had assured her they were all gone long ago; and once or twice he squeezed my hand so hard, Johnny, and when I looked up he didn't seem to be thinking anything about me—not one bit."

Little Polly was quite right; father was not thinking of her, pet as she generally was, and though mechanically his rough hand closed over the little palm thrust as usual into his as they came out of church, his mind was very far away, engaged on subjects widely different from those

which generally occupied that pleasant walk, looked forward to by both father and children as one of the chief treats the quiet Sunday afforded them after their busy week.

Reuben had been unhappy before, and Sarah Lockstone's visit had added greatly to his misery and perplexities. He was very thankful when the Sunday's dinner was over, the children dispersed, and he had the one opportunity he had been looking for to open his burdened mind to that wise woman Mary, who was ever his best consoler, and most often his best counsellor. She had been told the terrible incidents of the previous evening, and her night's rest had not been improved by the knowledge. She looked paler than she had done lately again ; but her face was calm, and the ready smile of comfort for her husband was there, before he began to speak of his fresh doubts. She had seen the added cloud long ago—the first glimpse of his face was enough.

"Mary," he began, as young Reuben, the last to leave the room, softly closed the door behind him, "I'd rather have given all the money I'm worth, it hadn't been me there last night."

"I should be very glad too, Reuben, dear, but it's no good to fret over it now," and poor Mrs. Hernshaw thought repentantly of her own advice and the cluster grapes, and wished heartily the

latter had been still hung up in the store-room on the string with the remaining bunches.

"I wish I hadn't stopped, or had gone sooner," proceeded the poor farmer.

His wife wished so too, but it was no good, as she had remarked, sorrowing over the spilled milk now; so she said, after a little pause,

"Well, Reuben, it does seem so to us, but maybe it'll all turn out best yet."

"I wish I'd never said a word agen the man."

"What I feel so thankful for is, that Mrs. Deborah was talking to you up to the very moment you heard the cry, and saw you going in."

"I don't see much good that's to do," answered poor Reuben, wearily.

"Why, what mightn't people have said about you yourself, if it hadn't been for that, dear? That man wouldn't stick at much, I'm afraid; and men have been taken up on a far more doubtful look than that, I've heard—haven't they, Reuben?"

It was a perfectly new idea to him, as his wife had thought when suggesting it, to divert him from his own self-tormenting view of the subject. It had been the very first to occur to her, and she had felt thankful indeed that it was after, and not before his interview with Deborah, the alarm had been raised.

"I don't see what you mean just, Mary. De-

borah didn't see him—I wish to goodness she had."

"No. I wasn't thinking of that. But suppose people had chose to think you'd had a hand in it, because they couldn't find anyone else, and you were there—that's been done before now, surely?"

Hernshaw started up, with a perfectly changed expression of face.

"Ah! sure, Mary, it has been done often enough, and, as you say, might to me; and yet I never thought of it before—no, not once, isn't that queer? And as to Stephen Lockstone," and he shuddered as he spoke the name, "he'd only have been too glad to get me into trouble like that, whether it got him out of it or no. Well, Mary, I am thankful too, now you've put it into my head—I couldn't get it there by myself," and a sort of smile came up over his face, which it rejoiced his wife's heart to see.

They continued talking of this a few minutes longer, Reuben's original distress lessening considerably, after a possible contingency so much worse had been pointed out to him; and then his wife asked what Miss Lockstone had come for.

"To get at the rights of the story, I think," returned Reuben; "but do you know, Mary, I don't feel half so sure about Stephen Lockstone since I've seen her, and that's a new trouble to me,

that I wanted to talk to you about, till you sent it right out of my head with the other."

"What could she say to make you disbelieve your own eyesight, Reuben?" asked his wife, surprised.

"Not just that, Mary. I feel as sure as ever t'was him I saw, but I don't feel quite so sure he must have killed the man; and I'd be sorry to say worse than he deserved, even of Stephen Lockstone."

Mrs. Hernshaw was rather in doubt whether such a thing was possible, but she only said,

"Well, Reuben, you've nothing to do but to tell the truth as to what you saw—what you didn't see, other folks must settle about; and you know nothing of what the man had been doing when he came out—he might have been doing nothing, for anything you know."

"And that's true again, Mary; and I've no call to say what I think, have I?"

"No, dear," and so poor Reuben was comforted again, and Sunday evening was a good deal happier to him than the morning had been.

It was so late when Dr. Armsdaile stepped up to No. 5, Newman's Buildings, that Sunday evening, that poor old Mr. Lee had had his supper and was gone upstairs. Perhaps his old friend rather expected this might be the case, as the conversation

he wished to hold with Frank was hardly fitted for his ears.

"Gone up, is he, Deborah? Well, you go and say I'll wait till he's in bed, and then go up too, and pay him a visit. Mistress there too?—Ah! well, I shall find the young people in here, I daresay," and so saying, the good Doctor entered the sitting-room. Here he found Mabel and Frank, as he anticipated.

"Well," he burst forth, before Mabel could utter the inquiry after Mrs. Lockstone, which was on her lips, "I've been to the old place, Mabel, and I've hardly recovered it yet—I was a fool to go!"

"Was not Mrs. Lockstone really ill, then?" asked Frank.

"Ill? Poor wretch! Well, I suppose she was what people would call so—she isn't well, that's certain; but it's no doctor she wants."

"Poor thing!—how did you leave her?" said Mabel, pityingly.

"Very much as I found her, and that was more dead than alive; whether she will rally at all, I am not certain. She cannot live long, and a happy thing for her too."

Frank looked shocked. He felt great compunction towards the poor lady now.

"Oh, sir!" he exclaimed, half-reproachfully.

"You wouldn't have her recover, to find her husband had murdered somebody else as well as herself, would you?" asked the Doctor, sharply.

"No, poor thing—far best that she should go," said Mabel, gently.

"Of course it is. What a poor creature she is, Frank! I remembered her, though. I used to see her often enough as a pretty young girl; and I knew her again, changed as she is, though I'd clean forgotten 'twas Stephen Lockstone she married. Better have got into her coffin on the wedding-day, poor thing!"

"Does she know what has happened?" asked Frank.

"Not exactly, so far as I can make out, and I don't think it would affect her much if she did, now; from all I can gather, she's lived in a perpetual terror of that man, and her body's a shadow, her mind a wreck. His not coming home to dinner yesterday began the last stroke of mischief, it appears, and the constables going into the room to hunt for him finished it. She lies there all but gone, and keeps saying, 'He'll be so angry! Send them away, Sarah—please send them away!' And very soon that will cease too, and the poor helpless creature be at peace at last."

A silence succeeded this announcement of the unfortunate Mrs. Lockstone's imminent danger.

By-and-by Frank inquired if Mr. Lockstone had come home.

"No—that is, no one has seen him. The house is watched, of course, but nothing has been heard of him, or seen, since he started for Merestown yesterday morning."

"I wonder what has become of him?" Frank said. "The constables could get no trace of him in any single direction, so Mr. Hammond's clerk came to tell me this afternoon; and neither of the coaches took up any such passenger within ten miles, and he could not have got further before they passed."

"Oh! he's gone off on horseback, probably, or lying concealed somewhere, and a great fool he is to do it. There's no hanging proof against him, that I can see, and his keeping out of the way only confirms what was a mere suspicion."

"Yes. I had little doubt of it at first, and now I am positive."

"After all, I can't see they could prove more than manslaughter, at the most—eh?"

"I don't know. Not that, perhaps—but it is impossible to say. Evidence of the strangest kind often comes out when least expected, in such cases as these;" and Frank thought, as he spoke, of the robbed cabinet, of which the good Doctor knew

nothing, and the broken wall, and all the circumstances known to himself.

"Ah! well, these country fellows are not the sharpest in the world; he may get clear off yet, if they don't get a London man or two to help them, and that they're not so fond of doing till it's just too late."

Frank smiled, and as Mabel and he exchanged glances, the Doctor impatiently exclaimed,

"Well, Master Frank, and what is your wiseacre head amused at now, I should like to know? Am I not right? These fellows are so conceited, they'll not let a soul come near, or have a finger in the pie, till they've spoilt it, and the chief detective himself would be puzzled to undo their mischief; then perhaps they may cry out for help. Am I not right?"

"So entirely so, my dear Doctor," and Frank smiled again, "that I sent up to London for a couple of detectives this morning, and they will be here to-morrow night, at latest, I hope."

"Well done, Master Frank, though I don't see exactly how it was your business. Murder or no murder, it won't get us back the poor Manor House, that I see. Ah! me, I shan't get the thought of it, as I saw it to-day—the same, and yet so different—out of my head for many a long day. Well, Deborah, what is it? I'm to go

up, am I, and master's impatient? No doubt he is. He was never otherwise, that I know of!" and muttering to himself, Dr. Armsdaile hurried up stairs.

CHAPTER XII.

SARAH LOCKSTONE moved about the Manor House the same as ever. No emotion had left its traces on her handsome, haughty face, no fear or sorrow changed her stately gait, or bowed the erect head; of the two, she carried it somewhat higher than usual, and a more scornful smile than ever curled her red, perfectly-curved lip. Her helpless, weary, worn-out mother was dragging out the last few hours of her life upstairs in that stately bed-chamber of the Lees, wherein she, at least, had known not even one moment's happiness. Her father, guilty of murder, that most fearful crime of all—as was more than suspected—a fugitive for his life—was none knew where; yet Sarah went on her way, the same, nay, harder, colder than ever, thinking of both parents as fools—fools who were vexing, or rather would, might vex her spirit by their folly, did she allow it to affect her, which she was firmly resolved it should not do. No, the old identity she had feared lost was returning to her in this extremity, and she would hold it fast—grasp,

struggle for it! It should not again escape, she thought.

If the weak woman upstairs had no power to fight against the force of circumstances, no strength to stand alone, indifferent—superior to the acts of others, why, she must succumb. It was no fault—no business of hers. She had had life's opportunities, and now—well, it was only herself she need blame for the mistakes she had made in their misusing. It was nothing to her.

And for him, so craven in spirit! let him reap what he had sown. She would have the fruit, bitter as the apples of Gomorrah, dust and ashes in his mouth. Stephen Lockstone had already found the success which had crowned his machinations, but his daughter scarcely realised this, as she thought with intense contempt of his present line of conduct. She had always known him weak, irresolute—of late especially so, but of such folly as the late events had spoken she had deemed him incapable.

And so Sarah Lockstone went on her accustomed way. Once, and once only, a change came over her scornful face, the colour came and went, and then flushed over neck and brow in anger and self-condemnation at the weakness, and that was when the thought suddenly presented itself—"Had Harry Neville heard? What did he

think? They were to ride to-morrow—would he come?"

During the day Sarah took occasion to send for the old servant from the High Street. Her mother's illness stood her in good stead there too. Of course she wished to see the faithful serving-maid of so many years. So, once more, her own groom was despatched into Merestown, this time in a light dog-cart, and Rachel was brought back in it to the Manor House. She looked very grim and strange as she trod for the first time the spacious halls and galleries which had, for so many centuries gone by, rung with the laughter and merriment of generation after generation of the Lees, or echoed back that heart's cry of sorrow or rejoicing which must ever be uttered—both—sooner or later in every human family. Joy for the fresh young spirit sent to gladden the mother's heart; sorrow for one who has been lent and claimed again—taken back to Him who gave it.

No thought of any such past experiences entered the old servant's mind, however, as she glanced at the oak panels, the heavily-framed pictures, and long narrow lighted windows; she gave not a thought to those who had been, and had passed away, and very little to those who now held possession. It was not on lands and homes her mind was occupied as she was ushered, with the usual

form and ceremony of the Manor House servants, to the presence of her young mistress. The grim smile on her face grew broader as she at length found herself standing opposite the latter in the luxuriously furnished boudoir, especially Sarah's own.

"Well, Miss Sarah, I can't think how you manage to find me out at all," she observed sarcastically, "with never so much as a page to show you the way! To be sure there's not quite so many rooms in the High Street."

Sarah smiled too; she did not care—of late particularly—for rousing Rachel's ire. *She* was *not* a fool, and now she especially desired to know, as soon as might be, all that that a by no means certain tempered individual could tell her of what had passed in High Street on Saturday, and anything else she might know.

The first Rachel readily told, and even the details, so far as she knew them, of Tony Hicks's death, with all the revolting particulars she had herself witnessed on her visit to the murdered man's house, the position the body had been found in, the wounds—all from which she and others had gathered the grounds of their conclusions as to how he had met his fate. To know it with certainty was as yet impossible; it never would be fully known.

Sarah had bidden Rachel sit down, and she had taken the great chair opposite to Sarah's own; and thus the two women sat facing each other, the faces not unlike in expression, not very dissimilar in style; but the one was old and furrowed, and had never been very beautiful, the other was young and smooth, and boasted a greater amount of beauty than often falls to the lot of any girl to possess. She sat silent after hearing all Rachel had to tell, her brows knitted slightly and her lips compressed; Rachel regarding her curiously the while, with a fixed intensity of gaze somewhat like that which it was often Sarah's own pleasure to employ.

They might have been copied, as they thus sat, as originals for an ancient sybil giving her first lessons in the mysteries of the unhallowed art to a young novice—and excellent originals they would have made.

Presently Sarah said, with a suddenness which might have startled some—the old servant was indifferent to it—

"Well, Rachel, and what do you think of it?"

Rachel gave a sharp, quick glance at her interrogator's face, and smiled a grim smile again, but did not answer.

It was now Sarah's turn to fix her eyes on the other's face, and she did so with an unflinching pertinacity not easy to resist, as she said sternly,

"Rachel, did you hear me?"

"Oh! yes, Miss Sarah, I heard you well enough, but there are some thoughts it's as well to hold one's tongue about?"

"Not to me, when I ask for them, Rachel, as you have known for many a year, and I ask you again to tell me what you think."

"For one thing, I think its mortal strange, Miss Sarah, how Tony should come back after all these years to die very much in the same fashion as he was the cause of poor Joel's doing so long ago. It makes me think of something I heard years agone, and that I'd clean forgot till now."

Rachel spoke in so peculiar a tone, that although Sarah fancied she might be only trying to evade the one thing she must be certain Sarah desired to know, she could not help asking,

"What was that?"

"Well, 'tisn't much in your line, Miss Sarah, nor, for the matter of that, in mine neither, I'm afraid; but Joel got me to go to meeting once. He took to meeting 'cause he lived where he couldn't get nowhere else, and Joel was always one to think of the Sabbath, till he got so mad about me; so, as he'd no church to go to, he went to meeting, and then he got to be used to it, and like it. He said it was so rousing, you couldn't go to sleep there—"

"Well, well," exclaimed Sarah, interrupting her impatiently, "but what of this that you heard?"

"I'm coming to that. Because Joel got to like meeting, he tried to get me to like it too, but I didn't. Church was bad enough, I used to think—for I was a giddy, thoughtless girl over such things as ever lived—and meeting worse. However, once I did go to please Joel—he'd given me a new gown, and I was to wear it to meeting with him—" Rachel paused a minute, her words had recalled those days so vividly; she could see the pattern of the gown now, and Joel too, and but for the sound of Sarah's foot tapping more and more impatiently on the floor, she might have wandered on about those days of her youth that had been haunting her so much of late, and forgotten altogether the one memory she had originally referred to. As it was, she went on—"The man who preached was a young one, good-looking, I remember, I thought him, and I tried to catch his eye, for I thought I was very smart, and I liked his look, too, in his black coat and stiff collar. Well, Miss Sarah, I did catch his eye, and I'd like to have run out of the place, for he looks straight as a line at me and says, 'Be sure your sins will find you out;' and on and on he goes, saying such awful things, I remembered some of them weeks after, though I did my best to forget them; and he had such eyes, they looked all on

fire like, and he preached and preached as if his whole heart went along with his words; and he grew paler and paler, and his sayings fiercer and fiercer; and when I got out at last, I was all of a tremble, and made Joel promise he'd never take me there again."

"You believe Tony's sin has found him out?" Sarah asked, with a strange sort of smile on her face.

"It's something very like it, I take it, Miss Sarah. Anyhow, after I'd looked on his dreadful face last night, every step I took back to the High Street some words of that discourse came back upon me; and as for the text itself, it was just as if that young preacher had risen from his grave—he died very soon after that Sunday—just a purpose to keep on saying it close into my ear over and over. I couldn't get rid of it all night."

"Perhaps you may now you've told it to me, Rachel," Sarah said, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice, but not so much nor so unalloyed as might have been expected. "And now once more I ask what do you think?"

Rachel met the eyes fixed on her this time, a fire in her own, and said with some irritation,

"Well, Miss Sarah, if you will have it then, I think Stephen Lockstone, your father's at the bottom of it; but as to how much, I know no more

than I do the why. Some reason there was, no doubt; and that they had dealings together I know well enough, but more I don't, so you needn't be afraid I can say it."

"I am not afraid, Rachel," Sarah replied very calmly. "I do not believe Mr. Lockstone murdered the man."

"Nor do I, that he did it, all settled beforehand, as you may say. I believe they'd a tussle, and Tony Hicks got the worst of it—but I don't mean to say that neither to nobody else but yourself, Miss Sarah. What I can say I will, and that is that your father left a message with me for Tony if he should call," and she looked meaningly at Sarah.

"Ay," said the latter, "you told me that before, I remember."

"You and I know how much that's worth, but other folks don't; and it'll stagger them a bit, I take it, if your father should be brought to his trial."

"He did not return to the office after he once left it, you are quite sure?"

"Oh, no! he has never set foot in the house since he went out late yesterday afternoon."

"He might have come while you were at Newman's Buildings."

"Not he; if he had, the coachman would have

known, for he sat at the door the whole time, grumbling his life out; and I left a message with the footman for him in case he should come back, but he didn't—I never thought he would."

There was a peculiar solemnity in these last words which attracted Sarah's attention. She asked quickly,

"Why not?"

"You won't think anything of what I'm going to say, Miss Sarah—I know that beforehand—but that won't alter its being true, and true it is; my grandmother told Joel, and Joel told me, and I know it's a true sign, I've noticed it more than once myself. Miss Sarah," and Rachel sunk her voice to a deep warning whisper, "your father looked back three times, with never a sign or a call from me!"

"Well, what if he looked back a dozen times?"

"Ay, but he didn't; it was just three, neither more nor less, and he never seemed to know that he did look back, or see nothing when he did. It gave me a bit of a shudder to see him, though it wasn't nothing to me."

"Well, I suppose not; but what idiot's superstition is there as to this looking back?"

"They who look back three times like that, Miss Sarah, never come back again, unless with their feet foremost."

Sarah laughed.

"I hope you are always careful to exceed the magical number, if you ever reach it, Rachel, since more or less, you say, does not entail such fatal results."

"You may laugh, Miss Sarah, but don't forget what I have told you," and Rachel rose gravely from her chair.

"No—I will try and remember it, to prove its folly to you, Rachel; and now come upstairs and see your old mistress. The doctors say that she is really dying," and Sarah led the way upstairs to her poor mother's unheeded bedside.

Sunday passed, and the night's dark curtain had again enshrouded all things, and yet no news of Stephen Lockstone had heen received. Sarah herself began rather to wonder where he had sought a refuge. She had taken care to be informed exactly of all the steps taken by the magistrate's officers to discover him, and had been at some pains to ascertain privately that, unless in some unknown, out-of-the-way place, he had procured no horse. Wherever he had gone, then, it had been on foot. The news of the murder was spreading fast and far, with all the usual exaggerations, and the name of Stephen Lockstone, as the premeditating, recognised murderer, had gone forth, too, with the amplified facts. There was

little doubt but that most of those in the immediate neighbourhood were by this time aware of all, and that with none would he be able to find a safe harbour. Where was he?—what was his purpose?—was he provided with money for any distant journey?—why had he been fool enough to keep away at all? These questions, and many similar ones, recurred more constantly than before to Sarah as she sat at her lonely vigil in the drawing-room that Sunday night. Mrs. Lockstone was sinking fast, they said; and it would not do for her to go to bed—indeed, she did not care to do so. Her mind had again lost its newly-recovered indifference, and was in a state of strange excitement. School herself as she might, and did, images would recur again and again, and possibilities suggest themselves, in the presence of which it was not easy to preserve that cherished state of unmoved scrutiny over the actions of others.

Indeed there was no one left to watch—no one to lecture—no one to guide—the poor fading-away shadow upstairs was already unconscious of all around her; and that other being, the husband—the father—why did he not send to her, at least? He was bound to do that—nay, he would do it, for his own sake, she felt sure, as soon as he could find the means. Why had he not found them?—in his place she would have done so long ago—

yes, a thousand ways of communicating privately with her. She wanted to know the truth—the truth as Stephen Lockstone alone was capable of telling it, as it seemed, from all she could learn; she had tried hard to glean it from others, and had made something of the fragments thus gathered; but the whole story was what she desired, and that could only be obtained in one way, apparently. The future was to be planned, too. Had he no thought of that?—why had he gone away at all?—having gone, why not have sought her first? Oh! if he had, all would have been so different now! Fool—fool to the end! and Sarah walked impatiently up and down the room, chafing at the impotent position she was, for the first time in her life, condemned to fill.

As she walked a distant sound caught her ear, and she stamped her foot impatiently; she hated the noise. Was it really true, as she had heard? It was one of Rachel's superstitions, she knew, that dogs howled near the house where the dying lay? What was it to the dogs that a parting spirit was taking flight? Pshaw!—it was sheer nonsense—at any rate, she would stop this; and with that object in view Sarah walked rapidly out of the room, and down the wide, stately stairs, which echoed strangely to her footsteps as she passed.

The servants had all gone to bed by her own desire—all but the nurse installed by her mother, and the maid who usually attended on her. Sarah's own maid had also been dismissed—except herself, and those two watchers by the dying bed, not a soul was stirring; all were, indeed, sound asleep. The last night's excitement had kept them up and awake to an unusual hour, and now, in spite of the near approach of death to the nominal mistress of the house, they were indemnifying themselves for their past wakefulness by a very deep repose, not easily disturbed.

The large rooms, the passages, the great hall itself looked strange, unfamiliar, ghostly, in the uncertain light shed by the taper Sarah carried in her hand. She was not lightly moved by anything of the sort; but more than once she turned to examine more accurately some long shadow that seemed instinct with motion, and as though it was a living thing approaching her—once she almost fancied she heard her own name whispered, and saw a hand stretched forth from one of the gallery curtains to arrest her progress. · It was nothing—nothing but the moaning of the autumn wind, now gently rising, as two o'clock brought the morning of another day, and a folded cord carelessly fastened by the housemaid; and as she turned away, Sarah angrily resolved nothing else should stop her

straightforward progress; nevertheless, she could not control a sudden start, as a repeated prolonged howl from Charon greeted her entrance into the cold empty hall, looking so chill and cold and vault-like in the gloom beyond the tiny circle of light her candle was capable of shedding.

It quickened her movements, however—she would stop that noise, and snatching up her leather thong from the table, she secured her taper from the influence of the draughts, and hastily unbarring the large heavy door, stepped out into the gloom beyond. It was intensely dark, the mist had quite cleared away, and there was a low murmuring wind, whispering about among the shrubberies and trees; but the sky was clouded—black it looked to her, and not a single star was visible; the moon was some days past the full, and was not yet risen, even if it could have been seen through that dark curtain.

Sarah gave one glance round, and then hurried away to the stables; the darkness mattered little to her, she could find her way in that as well as in the broadest noonday sun; and poor Charon's voice was again heard, this time in a low, plaintive wail, as though already protesting humbly against his mistress's intentions. Charon had been exceedingly annoying to her the whole day, however, and now the measure of his iniquity was full.

Not content with whining, howling, and pulling at her dress the whole way home in the morning, and increasing the violence of his tugs in proportion as she drew nearer home, he had fairly torn her dress as she was entering the house, and then, sitting before the door, howled so lugubriously as at once to convince the servants, long before Dr. Armsdaile's opinion had been given, that no hope remained of Mrs. Lockstone's life. Even this Sarah had borne; but when he continued his pursuit of her, still persistently tugging at her dress, and putting his large brown muzzle up in the air howling at intervals, she could no longer submit to the continued annoyance, and Charon had been led off to the stable, and there secured in an empty horse-box.

To this Sarah now took her way, opening the right door with a rapid, unhesitating hand, and seized at once on Charon's head, instantly put up beneath her hand, but she did not retain it—with one bound he escaped her hold, and fled away out into the darkness, before one stroke from the thong had descended on him. Sarah stood her ground, however, impatiently waiting the return she was so sure of; and back he came, but not so soon as she expected, and again her dress was violently pulled, and a beseeching but lower-toned whine went out into the darkness.

At the same instant a sharp stroke from the thong fell on the dog's side and made him jump, but he did not release his hold. He only whined again more pitifully than before, and pulled—her sleeve this time it was—with greater energy. What ailed the dog? He had never behaved in this fashion before, and the thought suspended Sarah's hand in the very act of again, and more vigorously, punishing him. Was there any meaning in the creature's pertinacity?—any sense in these successive repetitions of the same conduct in spite of his chastisements?

She reflected a moment, and then suddenly a thought, a possibility flashed on her. She scarcely believed it was a fancy likely to prove true, still, in such circumstances anything was better than the state of irritating uncertainty in which she had spent the last few hours. She, therefore, changed her tactics, and stooping down, put her hand caressingly on the dog's head, saying,

"What is it, Charon?—lead on, good dog."

No sooner were the words spoken, than he started away with rapid bounds; and when she moved forward a few paces, and then stopped, the dog waited a minute or two, then sprang back, whining, and pulled her on as before. Again she followed, until convinced that it was not towards the house, but in a totally opposite direction, the dog was

desirous of guiding her. This point once ascertained, she called him back, patting and encouraging him; but she passed her hand through his collar at the same time, and took him back to his prison once more.

"Wait, Charon," she said, as she closed the door on him; "I will come soon."

The intelligent creature seemed as though he understood her in a measure, for though he whined and scratched at the closed door for a second after she had gone, it was not so loudly or impatiently as before; and when she called back to him in encouraging soothing accents, he gave over, and with one short bark seated himself erect close to the door, his ears pricked forward, ready for action at a moment's warning.

Sarah, meantime, returned to the house, and, first of all, carefully refastened the hall door; then she took up her taper once more, and going to the foot of the stairs, listened for any sound from above. None came, all was still and silent as the grave. Then she quietly but rapidly made her way to the offices, and after listening at the back stairs as she had done at the front, she selected, from a row hanging up in the scullery, the lantern best suited to her purpose; and then hastened back, going this time not to the drawing-room, but to her own room.

There she first consulted her almanac as to the time of the moon's rising, and of the dawn at that season. These ascertained, she proceeded to equip herself with all haste in her hat and habit. She next secured all the ready money she possessed, in the bosom of the habit, then lighted the lantern, and extinguished the taper, placing it, however, within the lantern, in case it might be needed. Her next proceeding was to bolt her bedroom door on the inside, pass through it to her dressing-room, and out on to the landing, through that, the door of which she locked, and carried the key with her. Noiselessly she crept down a side staircase, and so along one of the passages the least used of any in the house, to a glass door leading out into the shrubbery, and less used than the passage itself. Through this she passed, leaving it unbolted after her, and once more took her way to the stables.

Not, however, this time to Charon; but to the stall where Jetty was littered down, the door of which was purposely left unlocked by her mistress's orders. It had been simply a whim of Sarah's originally, as she liked to visit the horse when she felt inclined; and as Charon was very often Jetty's companion during the night, it was convenient, if she chanced to want the dog, before the men were stirring, and in the summer mornings

this had been sometimes the case. That whim was a real boon to her now, as she thought when she went up to the mare's side, and Jetty neighed her recognition of her mistress.

But how about the saddle and bridle?—a bridle she must have, and for a moment Sarah feared she was foiled in her design; but chance favoured her. The harness room had two doors, one communicating with the three-stall stable of which Jetty was just now the sole occupant, and that one had been carelessly left unbolted by the groom. In five minutes the saddle and bridle were secured, and the door bolted on the outside; and in little more than ten Sarah had succeeded in putting them on Jetty, and with less resistance than that high-spirited quadruped usually saw fit to show towards her groom, when equipping her in the same fashion. One whinny and kick was all she ventured, and those, a word or two of stern command from the well-known voice of her mistress stopped before either was well completed.

Jetty was ready, so was Sarah—more than ready, she was impatient, almost eager; so was Charon, as witnessed his subdued but ever-recurring whines, which had recommenced from the moment he again heard Sarah's step near his prison. They were all ready; but the moon had not come up yet, and the night was still absolutely dark. Sarah walked

from the stable door to her horse, and then back to the door again and again; but no moon appeared, and it was folly to attempt such an expedition as hers in the blackness now shrouding every object.

For fully half an hour she waited, and during that time she walked out upon the sweep in front of the house, and looked up at the feeble light visible through the heavy folds of the curtains in the bed-chamber of the dying woman upstairs. What if the end came too soon?—before she was ready for it, before she had started on, or rather before she had returned from her errand, and at the thought her foot impetuously tapped and crunched the gravel beneath it. All seemed the same, however. The light flickered away unvaryingly, unmoved from its place; there was no hurry, no rushing to and fro, no shadows ever coming between that and the window—all was quiet, immovable; it was evident there was no change up there; and now, at last—what is it she sees yonder through the arch cut between the horse-chestnut and the beech on the east side of the park?

A faint glimmer of light rising, slowly but surely, sweeping away the dark canopy above, and replacing it by a soft grey curtain, brighter and brighter towards the horizon; and now there is a faint tinge of red, now of gold, and now—yes, at

last !—there comes the round disk of that eagerly-wished-for orb, the glorious moon herself, glorious and large still, though a good fourth of her proportions has become invisible for a day or two past. There she comes, slowly, stately, but dispersing the darkness fast, till soft shadows creep about upon the earth, and steal gently over the green sward of the park, and finally reach even the stable-door, where Sarah stands. The very stars themselves are peeping out now, when less wanted, and though there are still plenty of inky clouds sailing here and there over the sky, the landscape is visible enough, and the hour for action is come at last.

Sarah led Jetty out, fastened the stable-door after her, and once more released Charon, who rushed out in a state of intense eagerness and excitement, whined low and pitifully, and then returned to her, waiting impatiently till Jetty was mounted. This was soon accomplished, so perfectly obedient had the beautiful, high-spirited mare become to her equally high-spirited mistress. One word, and the creature stood like a block of black marble ; one agile bound from a large stone by the fountain in the midst of the stable-yard, and Sarah and Jetty were ready to follow Charon as quickly as even the dog himself could desire. Forward they went at a rapid pace, he leading the way through the very same fields Sarah had that morn-

ing traversed, on and on, till they came to the green lane; where Charon sharply turned, and galloped rapidly forward along that part of it leading to a path over the wildest and least frequented part of the country, eventually bringing you round to Merestown itself, by a rough road, very rarely traversed. Away went the dog, and away went Jetty after him, carrying her mistress with long light bounds over the uneven ground which terminated the lane, bringing her out on a long track of heath and common, interspersed here and there with deep hollows, and one or two sand-pits, whose abrupt sides made fast riding, nay, even walking itself, dangerous to the unwary, or those not fully acquainted with the exact geography of Hamer's Heath.

Tradition gave anything but a cheering or pleasant story concerning that same name of Hamer's Heath; but it had rather taken Sarah's fancy, and was one of her favourite riding-grounds; all she wanted now was to see the ghost of Hamer himself, as she had often told Harry Neville, when cantering over the common, and discussing Hamer's fate. The man had been a highwayman, as it was said, in the days when highwaymen were more common and more dangerous than they are now. He had been a gentleman once, so went the story, but, crossed in love, betook himself to the road,

more as a way of passing his time, and expending his fierce passions, than as an unlawful way of gaining his bread, for he was well-to-do. This heath, then a highroad between Merestown and another town of more importance than Merestown itself in those days, but now sunk into little better than a large village, had been the chief scene of his various exploits—probably, as it was afterwards thought, because this was the road most often traversed by his successful rival and his wife. Years passed, however, and these had never been encountered by Hamer, while he himself had always escaped the many plans laid to secure him. At last, one cold winter's night, the very couple on whom Hamer desired to wreak his vengeance were going over the heath with their eldest child, driving in an open gig—then a very common vehicle with people in their station. Hamer attacked them, cut the traces of the harness, shot his rival dead on the spot, dragged out the unhappy wife, and after beating her brutally with her husband's driving-whip, pouring forth the while torrents of invectives against her as the cause of his own ruined prospects, of the foul murder just committed, and of every bad act of his life, rode away over the heath, leaving his victim as insensible as her husband's lifeless body, exposed to the bitter cold of the keen winter winds. The cries of the child at

length attracted some belated travellers to the spot, an alarm was raised, a search instituted with better success than before, and Hamer was caught, tried, and hanged—hanged on the spot where he had killed his unfortunate cousin—for his successful rival bore that relationship to him—and on the self-same day that the miserable widow, who had lingered so long in a very precarious state, was released at length from her sufferings of mind and body. Such was the tale, and such the origin tradition gave for the name of Hamer's Heath.

From that period it began to be less and less frequented, till at last few cared to cross it unless imperatively obliged to do so. The road became grass-grown and rutty from disuse, and at length was altogether forsaken as a thoroughfare, and used only by those loving equestrian exercise as a cantering ground, and not even this till later years, when the tale of Hamer's brutal ferocity had become a century old at least.

The thought of the story came full upon Sarah as she cantered on in the uncertain moonlight, and the horrors of its details seemed to force themselves on her mind with greater distinctness of realization than ever before. She shuddered, too, as she passed the broken post said to be the last bit of wood left of the gallows on which the man had expiated his crime. Even Jetty seemed affected

by the unaccustomed feelings pervading the mind of her mistress. She almost stopped short on her onward career, giving at once a quiver of her whole delicate frame and a snort, at the same instant that Charon, who had hitherto been pursuing his forward path unchecked and persistently, suddenly paused, and, sitting down on a little hillock between some clumps of heather, gave a piteous and prolonged howl.

Sarah was angry—angry with both her dumb companions, more angry with herself.

This would never do; time was very precious, and they were wasting it. It was well she had taken Jetty instead of walking, as she had first thought of doing; they were already some miles from the Manor, and where was the end of the journey?

Nearer than she thought. After his howl was finished Charon rose, and before she could give him the meditated reproof, proceeded on his way, but this time slowly, and continually turning round as if to make sure she was following him. Where was he going to, turning off along a narrow, almost invisible sheep track among the heath and furze, the latter of which pricked Jetty's delicate legs, and made her lift them higher and higher, and step very gingerly. The dog had some design in his movements, of that she was more and more

convinced, but—where was he leading her? Surely Stephen Lockstone had not taken refuge here, among the old sand-pits? Not a bad place, certainly, to choose, but she did not believe he possessed courage to carry out the design if he had made the choice, and she looked round suspiciously, doubtfully, bringing Jetty to a standstill as she did so.

Not a sound was to be heard; the wind, that had begun to rise awhile back, had sunk again as the moon rose, and not a breeze rustled among the dry dead heather blossoms; not an insect—not even a night beetle, droned over them. Charon had stopped a few yards ahead, and now stood silent, motionless, his head turned back towards her as though to expostulate on her delay; but his ears drooped, and his tail hung heavily down, trailing after him on the ground. Jetty herself seemed hardly to breathe, so imperceptible was the motion of her flanks, so noiseless the passage of the air through her dilated crimson nostrils.

It was a brooding, oppressive stillness, and the cold white moonlight, now shining cloudlessly down over all, marking distinctly every tuft of furze, every deeply-shadowed dale, gave no life or cheerfulness to the scene—added rather to its strange ghastliness.

Sarah looked round once and again; no motion,

no sound; a chill crept over her heart such as had hitherto been ever a stranger there. Impatiently she shook it off, and Jetty's bridle at the same time.

"Forward, Charon—this is childish folly!"

The dog moved forward, but more slowly still, and he had not gone twenty yards when he again stopped, and gave out another of those terribly melancholy howls. Sarah urged Jetty forward. The mare bounded on, and then pulled herself up with a sudden jerk, planting her fore-legs firmly forward on the ground.

What did this mean? There was a sort of mound or bank just beyond on one side, the shadow of which threw the path into the blackest shade, and though Sarah peered forward anxiously she could see nothing—nothing but dense, black darkness. She turned her attention to the dog who, his howl ended, was whining piteously, as he advanced to where she remained on her mare's back. He came close up, and then suddenly disappeared at her feet. What was it?—a sand-pit? She did not know this part of the common so well; it was near the old road to Merestown, and not so smooth for cantering as the other parts.

Hesitating one second, Sarah sprang on the ground the next, and stooped down. Yes, there

was an abrupt descent of some kind ; no wonder Jetty paused. The moonlight penetrated lower down, as also on the opposite side—and though she could see the pit was unusually deep, she caught sight of something moving near the bottom. What could it be? She called; a whine replied to her. How foolish she was!—of course it was Charon, so far on his way to the depths. She looked round for some means of securing Jetty, and presently found it in one of the little stunted brushwood oaks. Twisting the bridle in and out, and bidding the mare stand quiet, she gathered up her riding-skirt, and cautiously began her own descent. If her journey was to end here she might have spared herself the trouble of altering her dress, but she had thought it possible she might have had to go to the next town even.

The bank was so perpendicular at the point where Jetty had refused to advance farther, that Sarah found it an impossible path, even for herself. Three sides were equally so, and only on the fourth could she obtain a footing; even there it was somewhat precarious, and but for a projecting bunch of heath, or a trailing bramble here and there, which she seized, regardless of tears and scratches inflicted on her hands by so thorny a support, she would have lost her footing more than once. It was far deeper than she had imagined

possible on beginning the descent, and Charon's whines and howls, which were now incessant, appeared to come from a long distance below, even when she imagined herself to be more than half-way.

She persevered, however, and at length reached a projecting point whence she commanded a full view of that part of the old sand-pit which was lying in the moonlight. It had not been used for many years, and the old entrance to it, originally very steep, had become almost impassable from the constant falling of the sides, and the wearing away of the torrents that flowed down after any heavy rain.

In that one patch of white moonlight at the bottom sat the dog, his head up, his howls growing more and more mournful as Sarah drew nearer. What was it he had his forepaw on?—something dark—something that had some resemblance to a human figure, surely; and yet no—it was— Determined to speculate no more on what it might be—to drive away that new terrible feeling at her heart, which had once more come to her worse, stronger than before, to dissipate all shadowy fears by action, Sarah sprang down the few remaining yards with the speed and agility of an antelope, and resolutely walked up to where the dog sat.

There lay the mangled figure of what had once

been a man, but was now a mass of broken bones and wounded flesh. Nothing remained as it had been in life but one hand and the face ; that hand held, tightly clutched, a greasy black pocket-book —that face was the face of Stephen Lockstone !

CHAPTER XIII.

THE early dinner at No. 5, Newman's Buildings was over, and the old man's chair had been wheeled to the window, his favourite position now, and he was himself established in it, "watching for Frank," as he said, when a sudden exclamation, of a kind very unusual with him, brought Mabel to his side at the same moment that he began calling on her.

"Look, Mabel, look, it is a funeral," he said, pointing to the path down which the body of the murdered Tony Hicks was being carried.

It had been found necessary to hasten the interment, and there were no clinging loving hearts to be wrung by the decision, or plead for the longer keeping of that senseless presence, still so unspeakably precious though the animating spirit had fled; so, though it was but Tuesday afternoon, the body was to be carried to its resting-place.

"I don't like it, Mabel," the old man said presently, as he watched the slow progress of the half-dozen or so of undertaker's men which formed the whole procession. No doubt plenty of the idle

ragamuffin crowd in the town would be added to it as it passed along, but as the fact of the funeral's taking place had not transpired, there was not one gaping lad even to follow the drunken clerk from his home to his grave.

Mabel looked somewhat anxiously at her father; she, too, had been ignorant of what was going on, or she would probably have postponed the removal to the window for an hour or so; she was not sure what effect the unusual sight might take on him. His eyes, however, expressed nothing but interest, and as he was watching intently, she trusted it was no real distress to him, and his next words proved that a far different feeling was at work.

"I don't like it, Mabel," he repeated; "why don't they have coaches—coaches and a hearse, and a great many people? I don't like it, Mabel," and he shook his head disapprovingly.

"They are not rich, papa, dear, or perhaps they would," Mabel answered, puzzled what to say.

"They ought, Mabel, they ought—it is all wrong. You must tell them so, dear. That isn't the way to do it at all, you know. There were so many carriages, Mabel—most of them were empty, but that did not matter, you know—how many were there, Mabel?"

Poor Mabel was quite at a loss now. She had not the faintest idea to what he was alluding, and as

nothing irritated him more than to reply "I don't know," she took refuge in a silent caress.

He pulled her down to him, as she stooped over the chair, repeating his question impatiently, "How many were there?" but as her fair young face came close to his own a sudden flash of intelligence passed over the latter, and as he gazed on hers he murmured,

"No, no, I forget—you weren't there, Mabel—you weren't there; only I—only I—my poor father!"

Ah! Mabel knew now, he was thinking of her grandfather's funeral—the last he had witnessed—and was comparing that stately ceremony with the desolate poverty of the meagre appliances attending that of the miserable Anthony Hicks.

"No, papa, I was not born then, nor Edward either," she said, thinking to divert the current of his ideas; but he had gone back to the old times, and was living in them with greater power of self-concentration than he could bring to bear on the things of the present.

He went on, half to himself—

"My poor father, he did not mean it—he did not mean it, you know, Mabel." And then, suddenly rising from his chair, he walked, much less feebly than usual, direct to the old cabinet, and began taking out one of its drawers.

Poor Mabel started forward in dismay. Had

he at last remembered the real secret of his anxiety about it?—was he going to look for the lost paper?—what would happen if he managed to open the spring, and found nothing but emptiness within? He did not notice her approach, but continued fumbling at the drawers, murmuring on—

"It's in there—quite safe—all safe in there, Mabel. Ah! he never got that, you know; I kept that safe—quite safe. You'll take care of it, Mabel, won't you?" and then the momentary flash of intelligence—the grasp on connected thoughts that he had recovered for the time—passed away as suddenly as it had come, and he leant on the cabinet, feebly patting it in his old fashion, and calling irritably on Mabel to put the drawer away, and that he would not have it touched. He should tell Frank—Frank would take care of it—why didn't Frank come?—and he tottered back in great haste to resume the watching he had forgotten in the excitement roused by the sight of the funeral.

That was now out of sight, and seemed to have passed as entirely from his mind as the old memories it had awakened, and the afternoon wore slowly away in the usual fashion, with the same petty interests—the same complaints of Frank for absenting himself—the same weariness to the poor,

imbecile old man, and to the two devoted women who watched and waited on his lightest wish or sign.

Frank did not come—indeed, Mabel was tolerably sure he would not, or, rather, could not until very late. The detectives had arrived early that morning, and she knew he would be occupied with them, and for them, all day probably. And as such was the case, it was not till after Mr. Lee had gone to bed that he ran in, looking pale and weary, and dispirited.

"You have found no trace of him, then?" Mabel asked, after, their first greetings exchanged, he had flung himself wearily into her father's chair.

He was silent for a moment, and then said, sadly—

"Mabel, all my new hopes have vanished again—quite gone—this time irrevocably. Stephen Lockstone has gone to his account—he is dead!"

"Oh, Frank!" was all the shocked, astonished Mabel could say.

"Yes, dead, and has made no sign, and there is an end of any chance of penetrating this mystery—at least, so I believe—I can see no way to it now."

"How did it happen?—where was he found?"

"In the deepest sandpit on Hamer's Heath. It

is supposed that he must have been making his way to the Manor House, over the old road there, missed his way in the darkness, and fell headlong into the pit. His body and limbs were fearfully crushed and broken. The only wonder is that his face was uninjured—had that suffered in the same way, it would have been almost impossible to recognise him."

"How fearful, and how wonderful!" said Mabel, with a face nearly as white as Frank's.

"Yes; his victim could scarcely have been cold when he, too, met a violent and sudden death," and the young man covered his face with his hands.

Strange and mysterious are the ways of Providence. Suddenly—awfully, indeed, had Stephen Lockstone's last sin found him out. No moment of warning, not one passing second of preparation, before he was hurled in the midst of his guilty success, his joy at having safely secured one of the objects of his craven fear, alloying all the pleasures of his prosperity, by means of a horrible and instantaneous death.

To do the wretch justice, he had never intended absolutely to kill Tony Hicks, and hoped that he had not, though the terrible fear of its being possible had sent him wildly fleeing on towards the

Manor on foot, and by the old unfrequented road, half senseless with unreasoning terror, mingled with a sort of delight as he felt the pocket-book safe in his hand. His one idea had been to get back to the Manor unobserved, and relate what had passed to Sarah, and he had hurried madly on through the gloom and darkness to the horrible death awaiting him in the old sandpit on Hamer's Heath—a fitting spot for such a dreadful end to such a life.

By-and-by Frank began to tell Mabel that no papers or letters had been found on Stephen Lockstone's body, any more than on that of the wretched old clerk, which could lead to even a suspicion, much less a knowledge, of what tie existed between them, if any, which some people were now very much disposed to question. Many and various were the suppositions afloat, some of them fast growing into facts as they circulated.

Reuben Hernshaw had been quite mistaken in his idea that it was Mr. Lockstone who rushed out of Tony Hicks's house on the evening he was found dead—it was a boon companion, who was drunk, and who had been drinking with Tony, whose death was simply accidental, the result of a drunken frolic. The inquest ought to be held over again. Yes, it was Stephen Lockstone that

the farmer had seen—Stephen Lockstone seized with a fit of insanity, in which he had attacked, and if not absolutely murdered, caused the death of an inoffensive old man, of whom he knew little, or probably nothing, like the rest of the town, and then committed suicide by flinging himself over the old sandpit on Hamer's Heath, leaving his poor wife to die of grief. It was quite a tragedy, than which none more striking or terrible had occurred since the days of Hamer himself.

Such were among the most rational of the stories afloat, and the young lawyer saw with sorrowful certainty his last hope of any discovery affecting the Lee Manor estate disappearing in the midst of them. Not a clue was to be found, not the faintest link which the detectives themselves could make anything of, and poor Frank had come back not only shocked by the result of the search, but disappointed and despairing.

He poured out the story of the destruction of his newly-resuscitated hopes to Mabel, before he gave the particulars as to the finding of the body; and she herself at last asked how they had been led to seek for it where it had been ultimately discovered.

"Well, in a very curious way, Mabel," Frank answered; "it seems the man had a dog of the true St. Bernard breed, and he first found the body, and then led others to the spot."

"Poor thing!"

"Yes; it is strange how faithful dogs are, even to the least worthy of masters; but I believe, after all, this was Sarah's dog. One of the servants said something of it, now I think of it. I meant to ask more about it, only other things put it out of my head."

"Were you there when they found it?"

"Yes, Mabel. I'm sure of it now. That extraordinary woman—I can't call her a girl—was there after all."

"Who?"

"Why, Sarah herself; and yet the dog never went near or recognised her. I don't understand it," and Frank knitted his brows in deep thought.

"But, Frank," Mabel gently suggested, "I don't half understand what happened—you only give me such very disjointed bits."

He smiled, but still only half alive to the present moment, so lost was he in reflection, and said absently,

"Don't I? Well, Mabel, dear, suppose that girl knows more about all this than I think possible."

He called her a girl then, though he had just abjured the title for her.

"Not very likely, is it? And even if she did—oh! dear Frank, it is not possible she should."

"If she does, all is indeed at an end," he said,

with a deep sigh, as though he had not long before made up his mind to that conclusion. "What Sarah Lockstone had once resolved on, she carried out, whether for good or evil. She was not one to turn from her purpose."

"Please tell me, Frank," pleaded Mabel again, as he seemed once more going off on a far-away journey to some hidden corner of his brain.

He roused himself at the gentle appeal, however, looked fondly at the sweet earnest face, so grave and pale in its grief for the sin and sorrow so busy around her, and giving himself a simultaneous bodily and mental shake, said—

"Well, Mabel, it is too bad, darling, and I have been talking riddles, I believe; but this thing possesses me somehow, and no sooner does all chance of finding out the mystery vanish, all hope go out, than some strange out-of-the-way fancy springs up, to recall and light it up again. However, it is very foolish—my reason tells me that, with this man's horrible death, all prospect of any discovery, by any means that I can see, is irrevocably lost, so I may as well make up my mind to it, and shut the door on these idle fancies. And now to my story—you want it with all details, I suppose?"

Mabel assented, and he at last began.

"The men set to work this morning as soon as they had had something to eat after their arrival.

They got all the particulars in a very short time, and rather astounded our slow Merestown functionaries, I take it, from Mr. Hammond himself downward. They were only just in time to see the poor wretch next door—he is buried, Mabel, I am thankful to say."

"Yes, I know—I am very glad too," and she glanced with a little shudder to the freshly-pasted paper, where the closet door still existed, though safely fastened.

"They went over the old house in the High Street, rode some way out on the principal roads from the town without success, and then went off to Meadowlands, before going to the Manor itself, to see Hernshaw. I went with them, and one or two of the county police staff, and we were cutting across the country by the bridle lane, when all on a sudden we came on this great St. Bernard dog. He was sitting on his haunches, whining, with his eyes fixed in the direction of the heath, and no sooner did he see us, than he began to bark and run forward towards the heath, looking back every now and then, as if inviting us to follow. I hardly noticed the creature, to say the truth, Mabel—at the moment I was thinking more of my paying my first visit to your own proper home in such company, and on such an embassy, than of the errand itself."

Mabel smiled sadly.

"Yes, the Manor House has sunk indeed. Well?"

"Well, some of the men observed on the creature's breed, and what a fine dog he was; and then, just as we were turning out of sight, the dog ran back within a few paces of us, and howled so mournfully as I never heard dog howl before; and at the same instant one of the Merestown men, who had been at the Manor with the warrant before, when first granted, said he thought it was the same dog he had seen there, and that it must be Mr. Lockstone's. On that the detectives came to a sudden halt, asked some few questions, and finally resolved to follow the dog, if it proved, as one of them suggested, that he was anxious we should do so. For my own part, the idea would never have occurred to me, and I confess I thought, with the other man and the country fellows, it was sheer waste of time. However, we turned, and away went the dog, stopping if we stopped, bounding on again the instant he saw we followed; and as we moved onward the man who had first proposed it told us a marvellous tale of his having once before discovered the lurking-place of a criminal by means of his dog."

"How sorry the poor dog would have been had he known it," Mabel said, compassionately, as Frank paused.

"Yes; but in this case good was effected, with no evil, even to the unhappy man himself, since he had passed beyond any human punishment. Well, Mabel, the dog took us straight to the pit, and down into it, and there we found the mangled body of the man we were seeking. But what has struck me since is, that a woman I saw on the heath must have been no other than Sarah Lockstone herself."

"Why?"

"I can hardly tell you. My reasons seem worthless, even to myself; and yet I feel more and more convinced it was she. I saw her for the first time as we got out on the heath from the narrow green lane; she was a little in advance of us, and considerably to the left, but she kept straight on in a parallel line to our own till we had got to the pit mouth, and then I saw no more of her, and the dog vanished too."

"What! before you had found the body?"

"No, but immediately afterwards, I take it. We did not all go down—only the man who had first proposed following the dog, and one of the country fellows. I and the rest remained on the edge, till a shout from the others took us down too. When I got to the bottom no dog was there, and the woman had disappeared before; how or when I cannot imagine, for though I had no thought of its being her at the time, I had kept my eyes

mechanically fixed on her, and yet which way she went I cannot tell—the inequalities of the ground would account for my losing sight of her occasionally, but I got up a bank, and could see no trace of her."

"Was she like this Miss Lockstone?—would you not have known her?"

"Yes and no. She was about her height, and something in her carriage reminded me of her from memory—I mean as I think of it now; it never struck me at the time, as I said, but she was dressed more like a countrywoman than anything else, in a red cloak, and with a basket on her arm."

"But the dog would have gone to her, not you, if it had been his mistress."

"Yes, I should imagine so; and yet I can't make it out, the man was surprised the dog did not stop with us till the body was removed, and accompany it, instead of disappearing the moment he had taken us to it, as he did."

"But what object could she have had, unless she knew what was there, and then surely she could never have acted so. Oh! Frank, it can only be a fancy of yours."

"I tell you, dear, my reason says so over and over again, and yet I can't get it out of my head; if it was she, undoubtedly she knew what was there, and had instructed her dog to take some one to

find it, and in that case I don't know what to think. It is altogether mysterious, and impossible to understand. I only wish I could find some way of clearing it up. Had the idea occurred to me at the time, I would have gone straight up to her there and then. Always too late!" and Frank sighed wearily.

"Nay, Frank, it is no good to worry over what is but a conjecture, and rather a far-fetched one, too, I cannot help thinking. Besides, what good would it have done if you had gone to her and proved it to be Miss Lockstone? I cannot see."

"None at all, really, perhaps," answered Frank, moodily. "I could not have any right to interfere with her because she was on the heath in an old woman's cloak. So you are right there, Mabel; but I can't help suspecting all sorts of things—wishing innumerable impossibilities!" and Frank sighed.

"What was done with the wretched man's body?" Mabel asked, after a minute's pause.

"It was carried to the Manor House. We could not treat that as the body of a criminal, as he was unconvicted, uncondemned; the men searched him at once, but there was not a scrap of paper of any interest upon him—a letter or two connected with the affairs of the Manor farms, a public circular or so, and nothing more."

"Dear Frank, did you expect to find that mysterious paper from which we expect so much, not very wisely, perhaps?"

"I hardly know what I expected. But of course he was not likely to carry it about with him."

"What a dreadful shock it must have been to his family, poor things! and we are talking of it only as a matter of business, as if there was nothing to sorrow for, no aching hearts!"

"And I expect that is the case, Mabel, impossible as it may seem to you. Mrs. Lockstone is not in a state to realize anything, and as for Sarah —there, I won't talk of her any more!" the young man added, determinedly.

"Did you carry it there with no preparation— no warning?" Mabel asked, with a look of horror.

"No—we could not if we would; we had to fetch some means of raising the body from the pit, and wanted more men besides. I and one of the detectives went to the Manor first. I offered to see Sarah herself, meaning to break the matter to her as gently as I could; but she refused, and I only saw her maid, who was shocked enough, poor girl, and undertook to tell her young mistress as carefully as she could. Mrs. Lockstone still lay unconscious, she told me. I got some of the men-servants together, and went back to the heath, just to see that everything was done as it ought to be;

but I did not return to the Manor again, I only watched the men carry their fearful burden in, and then I came away, sad-hearted enough, Mabel, for many reasons."

He looked so, poor fellow, and Mabel was glad that Deborah came in, at that instant, with a tray of refreshment, and did her best to bring him back to something like peace and comfort while he was partaking of it.

CHAPTER XIV.

SARAH LOCKSTONE sat in her dressing-room, both doors of entrance securely bolted—an open desk before her, and two or three papers spread upon her lap. Her face was blanched—blanched to the dead whiteness of a plant that has tried its best to grow, shut out from all sun and light. But in spite of the changed complexion, there was the same fierce fire in the eye—a more resolute, more sarcastic curl upon the well-formed mouth, and these were all the more striking, from their contrast with the strange whiteness of the face around.

As her eyes were glued upon the papers, her mouth curled more and more, and the expression that it wore had grown very evil when her maid knocked for the third time at the door.

"What do you want?" Sarah asked sharply, angrily.

"Mr. Neville is below, ma'am, and begged me to come up and tell you so."

A strange spasm passed over that set face, a quiver shook even the fingers resting on the

papers; but she answered in the same impatient tone,

"Have you not told Mr. Neville I can see no one—that Mrs. Lockstone is dangerously ill?"

"Yes, ma'am, Barnes did first, and I did afterwards; but he begged me to come up."

"Go down and tell Mr. Neville the same again!"

But, nevertheless, Sarah began to fold and put away the papers in her desk. She had just locked it, and was standing with the keys hanging on her fingers, when Martin knocked again, with the message that Mr. Neville knew it, and was so grieved, but begged to see her for a moment, if she could leave the sick-room.

The maid hesitated over the latter part of the message, though she took the utmost care to repeat every word as she had received it; and Sarah, as she listened, stamped her foot impatiently; but she opened the door at once, swept out of the room, passed the girl, vouchsafing her neither answer nor notice, and going straight downstairs met young Neville, with his eager, anxious face, standing at the foot of them. She gave a quick look up at him, and her brow contracted, but only for a moment, for she saw that as yet he knew nothing.

"Oh! Sarah!" he exclaimed, seizing her hand,

and ignoring all formalities in his warm-hearted emotion. "How terribly sudden!—is there no hope?"

And he gazed pityingly, sympathisingly upon her, as he noticed, with sorrow, the extraordinary change in her brilliant brunette complexion.

"None, Mr. Neville," she answered, in a voice colder than usual, and with a bitter tone in it, that jarred painfully on his ear. "What do you come here for, Harry Neville, at such a moment? You have no right."

"No right, perhaps," he answered, sadly; "but surely you will not deny me the privilege of seeing you for one moment—telling you myself how I feel for you."

"May be—if you came here knowing all that has happened—all that is said—but you do not. Go—go into Merestown, Harry Neville, and listen to the iron-tongued monster—believe half that it tells you, and then—you will go home to Castle Neville, and wish you had not scorned my warning."

And she fixed her mocking eyes on his.

"You speak in riddles again—and at such a moment!" he said quietly, but reproachfully.

A faint shade of colour passed over her cheeks for an instant; but she waved her hand impatiently.

"I speak no riddle, I bid you go and do a simpler

thing than the Syrian of old was bidden; and yet, like him, you will not do it. Go——"

"To Merestown, to listen to some foolish gossip; is that what you would have me do?"

And now he did look surprised.

"Yes."

"And after, may I not come back?"

"Back!" and there was intense scorn in her tone; "if you desire it, yes, but you will not; conviction will come to you at last," and flinging from her the hand which he had again laid on hers, Sarah turned away and walked hurriedly into one of the adjoining rooms.

Harry Neville looked after her, puzzled, grieved, and stood still for a minute or two, as if irresolute; then his honest face cleared, and, muttering with a sigh, "Poor, poor thing, how sorrow tells on her!—if I could but comfort her!—but I will do her bidding," turned away again through the hall, and out at the door, which the footman had been discreet enough to half-close, as he stood on the outside chatting to young Neville's groom, and jumping on his horse, was soon galloping fast away.

Sarah, meanwhile, was standing still as a statue within the study, which was the room she chanced to enter, though at the moment she was not aware of it. She listened with her impassive marble

face till the young man had left the house, then raised her head suddenly, and bent her ear to catch, if it were possible, the sound of his horse's hoofs. Would he go to Merestown, or would he go across the Park, by the private way leading to the road to Castle Neville, which he had of late been privileged to use? To Merestown, yes, there was no difficulty in deciding that, as the two horses were heard clattering along the gravel at full speed; they would have been on the green sward before had they taken the other turn.

Nearly half an hour had passed, and Sarah still stood in the same position, motionless and breathless she might almost have seemed to any but a close observer; the only difference was that her face was now bent slightly down, the arched neck taking a most uncommon curve, in lieu of the haughty erectness which usually characterised it. Strange thoughts were busy in that seething brain within the bowed head, unwonted musings stopping ever and again their onward course, and claiming, enforcing unwillingly yielded attention to themselves.

By-and-by she roused herself with a quick, impatient start, and looked proudly round the room. Her father's room! Yes, the servants called it "Master's study" still. Master's, and he!—pshaw! what was come to her? Was she to have

the same fears as other people—to be like the fools she despised? And what was it after all?—death! and she shuddered involuntarily. This would never do—it should not do—she would be herself again, and with that resolve she passed all round the room, scrutinizing every object in her progress. Those drawers, they must be looked into, but not now—to-night, when all was hushed and still. And then she went out of the room, and bent her steps towards her own again. The one thought that would not be stifled, but kept knocking for its answer at her heart, being, "Would Harry Neville come back?"

Once more in her own sanctuary, and with the doors refastened, she went up to the fireplace—the fire was laid, but not lighted; it was not a cold November. She struck a light and applied the match to the shavings within the grate. The fire burned up quickly, furiously, and, to increase the flame, she flung on it one of the wax tapers from her table; then she went to the same desk she had had open before, unlocked it, and from one of the sides took out a large black pocket-book. It was very greasy and dirty, and much worn, and looking greatly out of place held in her white jewelled hands, but they grasped it very firmly nevertheless, and subjected it to a second close and accurate search. There was no-

thing more of value in it, however, except the address of that English clergyman at Frankfort, which she had determined should be destroyed; but finally let it remain where the other papers were; for, after all, it was of no moment—so she put it aside upon her desk. The other letters and papers—faugh! how they smelt of spirits and stale tobacco, and how dirty they were! —they might share the fate of the pocket-book itself.

She carried them to the fire, and stuffed them within the bars by the aid of the poker; then, as the freshly-fed flames leapt up round and above them, she held the pocket-book aloft for a moment, and dropped it into their very midst. In five minutes all trace of it and the greasy bills and memoranda had vanished—nothing left but a few thin ashes, which would tell no tales. The house-maid would scarcely notice they were there, much less suspect what they had been; and Sarah stood erect again, the old smile on her face, and a red streak, from the scorching of the blaze over which she had been bending, on either corpse-like cheek.

That was done! She was glad of it. She did not care for keeping that miserable creature's filthy pocket-book in her possession longer than need be. Now, what next? Ah! why didn't somebody else

go to Hamer's Heath?—would nobody go to that sand-pit? This morning, *this* morning—was it possible that even a day had not passed since she had gone? To her it seemed a month ago. Surely somebody must go before long? Well, if none did, it must be seen to to-morrow, at any rate. There were other matters to occupy her to-day. And, shaking off as best she might the feelings again creeping over her, Sarah carefully made a packet of the papers she had been examining in the morning, tied them round and sealed them securely at either end, made a private mark on the outer wrapper, restored them to her desk, locked it, and, after stirring up the fire and raking out the ashes, to be quite sure no tell-tale atom of the burnt pocket-book remained, unfastened the doors and prepared to go downstairs.

If he did come, he should not fancy her watching the senseless form of a weak woman this time. As she passed the glass the reflection of her face caught her eye and startled her. No colour yet. Should she have to take to rouge? What folly! Why could not her physical frame be as independent of all outer circumstances, all shocks, all chances, as her mind? She hated that pale tell-tale face, and herself for having it. Why was she so weak? Could she not conquer her body even? And she hurried almost impetuously down-stairs, and bade

Barnes bring her some of the oldest port the cellar boasted, in the hope that perhaps the ruddy wine might restore the glow to her cheeks and replace the blood which seemed to have fled thence for ever. The wine was drunk but the face remained as marble as before, and Sarah began pacing up and down the dining-room. If he did not come in another half-hour he would not come at all. The clock on the mantel-piece ticked on, and still she kept up her firm unwavering tramp. Twenty minutes—in another ten she would give him up, and then—ah! why, it would be a relief—she could go back quite to her old self then, if she found it so difficult to do it now; and then—ah! what would it be like to rule alone at the Manor, to keep stately house and form, with none to watch, none to sneer at, no silly mystery of the last cherished, obstinately-hugged cowardice of a craven's heart to detest—only the general world to ridicule and laugh at, and sometimes fool to the top of its bent, if that said top was to be reached—what would it be like? Would it become as wearying as other things?

And if he came?—pshaw! he would not—she would not think of that; and if he did, why, he was a greater fool than all. Why not laugh at and scorn him, too? Yes, but he would not. Ah! what was that? The grooms returning from exercising the horses, of course; and though she

knew better, and, in spite of all her efforts to subdue the emotion she felt such supreme contempt for, trembled from head to foot; she persisted in repeating it was only the grooms, till Harry Neville once more stood by her side.

His face was pale too, now, and troubled, but there was nothing but love and compassion in his frank blue eyes, as they anxiously sought hers, as if to assure her of his perfect sympathy. She read them rightly enough, but she chose to have more than that silent answer, and she said coldly, imperiously the one word "Well?" turning her eyes from him as she did so.

"Could you fancy I should believe in such a tale for an instant; or if I could that it would make any difference in me, Sarah? I have told you long ago that I love you, I tell you so again—more, I tell you now that even were your father a convicted criminal, it could not change—it could not kill my love; you are a distinct person from all others, however bound to them by natural ties, and their sins could not, in my esteem at least, tarnish the purity of your soul—your character."

"Would the Hon. Henry Neville take a murderer's daughter for his wife?" Sarah asked with a bitter scorn in her voice, but a softer look than ordinary about her mouth.

"Yes," the young man answered boldly, un-

hesitatingly, in his passion of love and pity for the beautiful woman whom he regarded as the helpless victim of circumstances.

She looked long and earnestly into his true honest face, and for the first time in her life a genuine woman's smile, soft and gentle, parted her lips. It rested on her features but for a moment, however, lightening them while there with an unspeakable beauty, despite the deadly pallor no wine, however strong, had power to remove; then, as she sighed almost inaudibly, the old look came back in greater force, but nevertheless she spoke in a low and unusually gentle tone.

"Harry Neville, yours is a true heart. Thank you for its gift, though I should have been better pleased had you withheld it. You have shaken the faith of a lifetime—and to what purpose for yourself? None—but that it may bring you the sorrow you have the capacity to feel in its reality for me. I hardly know what result may follow. You little fathom the bosom you would so readily take to your own, but you have raised within it a struggle hard to bear. Harry, will you promise me a favour?"

"A thousand, dearest—anything," returned the young man eagerly, hardly believing eyes or ears or touch, as he felt the hand so often snatched from his laid willingly within his own.

"If, no matter what you hear, you are still faithful to the assurance given me just now, keep away from here, send me no message, do not come yourself—keep quite away. Will you do this?"

The young man did not answer, the request was so unexpected, so strange—above all, so terrible to him, that he could not; his changing countenance, and trembling hand as it still held hers fast, betrayed what was going on within his agitated mind.

Sarah read him even better than he could himself, looked at him curiously, questioningly, and then sighed again as she went on—

"I must fight out my battle alone, without your presence at least; but, do not misunderstand me, you shall hear from me again—see me again—only, will you wait my time?"

Poor Harry's transparent face cleared a little as he answered,

"You have found out just the very hardest thing you could, Sarah; but let it be—if I must stop out of your sight and reach, by way of showing my love for you, why, I'm ready to do it—only, for heaven's sake, don't try me too long!"

"Remember, if you break the covenant once agreed on, I am to conclude you repent—retract the words you have spoken this morning."

"I shan't!—I can't! Oh! Sarah, you are

hard on me—at least let me know how you are? —you are pale as the driven snow to-day," and he looked anxiously at her.

"Have no fears of that sort—I am well, and shall continue so; if I do not, you shall hear—are you content?"

"May I come, or send to the Lodge to ask for you?" and Harry spoke rather as if he *would* do that, let her say what she might.

Perhaps Sarah thought so, for she answered—

"If you will—yes, but no farther—no message, no note. Wait—wait in patience; and now go."

He wrung her hand, and pressed it to his lips. Her conditions were terribly hard, he thought; but he had a hope—a something he had never won before—something worth enduring a little for, and so he rode back to hear all his lady mother's exclamations on the Merestown tragedy, or his father's shortly-expressed conviction, "All those sort of people were sure to get into some mess, rightly or wrongly, when venturing out of their sphere," and to hope and pray that Sarah would not in mercy make his probation a long one.

Mrs. Lockstone lingered yet. The doctors wondered, the servants whispered, the nurse shook her head, and yet life fluttered uneasily within that weak, broken-down, unconscious body. It was Tuesday afternoon—almost evening, so far as

the light went, for it was foggy again, and the light began to be very uncertain about the house, when Sarah Lockstone, to the bewilderment of the watchers there, walked into her mother's bed-chamber, and seated herself silently beside the bed on which the poor lady lay, a faint—very faint motion of the bed-clothes above her chest being the only intimation that life was not yet extinct.

Sarah was as pale as on the previous day—whiter, Martin thought; she was growing nervous and uneasy. Her mistress was always locking herself into her room, and when the little maid went to listen "she couldn't hear so much as a sough," as she confidentially reported to Barnes, who, portly butler though he was, did not disdain a passing word or two of gossip with the pretty young ladies'-maid when he happened to meet her, which chance occurred singularly often.

Yes, Sarah's doors had been locked all the morning, and best part of the afternoon too, and it was not likely that Martin should have heard any sound of life within. Frank Marsden's conjecture was perfectly right. It was Sarah Lockstone who for many weary hours that day had waited with Charon, well tutored for the part he had to play, in the green cross-lanes between Meadowlands Farm and the Manor House. She had hoped—waited for what had happened at last, though she

would have scarcely chosen, could she have had a voice in the matter, that the very people whose notice the dog attracted, after all, should be the detectives and their companions. It had made her own part more difficult to play; she had had to conceal herself altogether till they gained the heath, and then as much as she could. However, it had all gone off very well; Charon had done admirably, and she had gained her room unseen and unsuspected, just one half hour before Frank had brought the alarm to the house, and now they would be bringing *that* here soon. She would wait its arrival at the dying woman's bedside, and see if Rachel would prove right again.

It was a trying time, even to Sarah's self-contained spirit, to sit there looking on the inanimate face of one who would soon belong less to the living than she did now, and listen, in the oppressive, awe-struck silence reigning in the chamber, for the bringing home of all that remained of that other one—the master of the house—the husband of the dying woman—the mangled, horribly mutilated corpse of what had once been the handsome lover, the admired, if rather feared, bridegroom of the poor, terror-sickened wife, whose life had been worn away by his violence and injustice.

Sarah thought of these things, and though a

sad smile passed more than once over her white, set face, and a shiver more than once also passed through her frame. Hark!—what was that?—Charon's howl again. He would follow her home, in spite of her desires to the contrary, and now sat at the entrance, as if watching for—knowing what was coming. Was it coming?—yes; there was no mistaking that dull, heavy tramp—the hushed mutterings of many whispering voices.

Sarah listened for a second or two, then looked curiously at the form on the bed. Presently a convulsive twitching passed over the poor thin face. Sarah beckoned the nurse near, and resumed her watching. The noise below had reached to the hall now, and as the procession began to enter there, exactly as Rachel, who had returned to the Manor just in time to hear young Marsden's tale that afternoon, had predicted, the sick woman suddenly raised herself up, with a strength that seemed a minute or two before to have passed away from her for ever, and opening her pale blue eyes, looked wildly round.

"It's not my fault, Stephen—I could not make her a boy," she said, almost shouted, with clasped hands, and gazing here and there with terror deforming every feature.

"Mother!"

How many weary years it was since that word,

that precious name, had sounded in the parched ears which so often longed for it in vain—sounded with any true filial meaning in its utterance, that is. It had it now, though Sarah herself perhaps was scarcely less surprised at it than those who listened. A wonderful change passed over the weary, troubled face, a marvellous peace shone over it—she stretched out her arms, murmuring, "My darling, my darling, he shall not hurt you!" and fell forward on Sarah's breast, at peace for ever at last!

CHAPTER XV.

FRANK MARSDEN'S gloomy and self-reproachful (for he did reproach himself, and very severely, though, as Mabel said, and tried hard, but vainly, to convince him, it was very unreasonable of him so to do) anticipations were fully realised.

The terrible death which had overtaken Stephen Lockstone so immediately after Tony Hicks's murder, if it did not at once lull all suspicion regarding his possible concern in the latter to rest, at any rate so moved the compassion of most people, that they were very willing to believe these said suspicions ought never to have been awakened; while the utmost efforts of the detectives failed to discover any reasonable grounds for believing a premeditated destruction of the drunken old clerk could be an object with the rich landed proprietor.

In short, the two deaths were talked of, written of, in the local papers, and were the wonder of the neighbourhood for longer than the legitimate number of days; but the more they were spoken about

and discussed, the less any connection between the two was believed in; while nothing more resulted from the examination of Tony Hicks's house by the detectives, insisted on by Frank, than great indignation on the part of the landlord, and their own-expressed belief that the tenant must have been one of the London swell, and had intended a raid on the Lees' property, but had not found enough to pay for the risk; and back to London went the gentlemen, hugging the same conviction closer and closer, and leaving poor Frank to fret and fume, to chafe and watch, and finally to give up all hope in reality, as he fancied he had done before, and turn all his energy on the speedy completion of the arrangements for his and Mabel's marriage, which these events had greatly interfered with.

Still, youth and love and energy can do wonders, and by New Year's Day he was sure, determined all would be ready; so Mabel's quiet little preparations went forward too, and Newman's Buildings looked, and its inmates lived just as they had done before "the tragedy in real life," as the "Merestown Weekly Chronicle" had called the deaths of Tony Hicks and Stephen Lockstone, had been enacted.

The master of the Manor House and his unhappy wife, however divided in their lives, had been closely united in death, and were buried side

by side, not, to everybody's great surprise, and to Mabel's secret rejoicing, though she scolded herself for the sentiment, in the church of that parish, but in Merestown itself. The bodies had been taken overnight to the old house in the High Street, and thence, the next morning, to the big, dull town churchyard. Because the lost baby sons of the house lay there, and some relative of Mr. Lockstone's, people supposed; but they thought it rather odd, notwithstanding, and so did Mr. Geldfinder—indeed, he was inclined to dispute the matter with his austere sister-in-law, till he found, to his dismay, that not only the Manor, but half of all the ready money, to say nothing of the old houses in High Street, had been left to her also. After that he was very quiet.

He and his wife had answered the letter, telling them of the deaths of both father and mother, in person. Hester grumbled a little at the fatigue; but she should be able to get her mourning—one set, at least, made in the half day and night before they started; and she should like Sarah to see the difference between a London dressmaker and that stupid Miss Dadd, in Merestown. Perhaps Sarah would look at a bonnet too now; and so she reconciled herself to the journey through the November mists, with a tolerably good grace.

As for her husband, he was impatient till they

could start—like a vulture, he scented the prey afar off; where there were riches, and death came, there must be a will—a will, and something to make it about; and he must be on the spot to clutch at once all, perhaps more than all, that might justly fall to his share in the spoils.

Grievously disappointed at the scantiness of those spoils was he; and bitterly did he complain, till he dared say no more. He stood in some awe of Sarah, formally now in greater; she was unmarried; he had made a mistake, it seemed, in taking the eldest daughter. Had he known the terms of the will before, would it have given him courage to woo the younger? He was rather afraid not. At any rate it was not too late to regret not having done so—and—she too might die, therefore he contented himself with being so subservient to her will, so sycophantly anxious to gratify her most slightly expressed whim, that the object of his sickeningly incessant homage had some difficulty in not having him turned out of the house before his visit came to an end. She was in no mood for being amused at such folly, even had it not been carried to a pitch which made it too insufferable to be amusing—too bad to be worthy of her scorn.

Even Hester escaped that in a greater degree than she had ever done before; and as she had in

bygone times opened lazily her large blue eyes at the sharp taunts of her sister's tongue, so did she now do the same, occasionally, at her complete immunity from these, when she gave sufficient attention to what was passing, to realize it. So the Geldfinders wended their way back to town, after what the gentleman, at least, considered a most profitless visit to the old Manor House.

"Well, Mabel, to-morrow is it?" Dr. Armsdaile asked, on the last day of the old year, as he stood near the window in the dusk, Mabel by his side, and something strange and glistening in his eyes, which he had to blow his nose vehemently to disperse.

She did not answer; but glanced up at him with a shy, happy smile. Frank was sitting by the old man, trying, somewhat vainly, to make him comprehend that he and Mabel were to go away to-morrow for a few days, to get ready to come and fetch him. The poor invalid was less easily pleased by him than usual, and more difficult to satisfy, insisting that

"He must go, too—Mabel could not go without him."

Mrs. Lee sat a little apart, her soft loving eyes seldom moving from that darling child's face, an in-

ward prayer for her happiness ever silently ascending from the mother's heart.

"And I'm to act papa, eh? little lady; and it's all to be quiet and snug, and no one a bit the wiser till it's all over."

And the good old doctor tried hard to be facetious with a very heavy heart.

The little lady did not answer again—she only slid her hand into that of her old friend, and asked, in a low tone, if he had seen Edward's letter.

"Yes," and he sighed a little as he answered, "it's just like him, poor boy. I wish he could have come over; but one might as well wish for the great Mogul—a great nuisance he'd be, by the way, so there's no help for it."

"I am so glad he seems satisfied—I was a little afraid——"

Mabel hesitated.

"Afraid he'd be a fool, Mabel, eh?—quarrel with the slice of plum-cake turned up for us all, just because it wasn't of the very richest description, and sent out by the king's own confectioner? Not he, my child. He's been having lesson on lesson, to teach him better, poor fellow; and his uncle would go all our way too."

"Yes; he is speaking more hopefully of his affairs out there, too, do you observe, and thinks

he may recover a large sum of money he had believed lost."

"Oh! ay, I see it all. That's always the way, little lady—money's sure to come just when it's not so particularly wanted—never when it is. Bah!" and so the good old doctor grumbled on all the evening, only now and again varying the not over-congenial employment by a grim joke or two, greatly more in accordance with his natural character; but poor Dr. Armsdaile could not help feeling sadly and deeply that in a few days more he would be left alone; for to him to lose the old friends, always so dear, and of late become trebly so from their misfortunes, would be to be left alone. They would be far away from his reach in London—soon forgotten, probably, even by the few who now remembered them; and to him the county would be a different place when the Lees had not only left the Manor, but the neighbourhood.

Frank and Mabel were married very quietly—so much so that very few people knew that a wedding was going on even. Dr. Armsdaile gave her away, and old Mr. Ravenshaw came over, carefully wrapped up by his wife, to perform the ceremony.

"It wasn't like a Lee's wedding," as poor Deborah sadly repeated to herself as she pinned her white favour on, in readiness to greet the little party on

their return. No, it was not like a Lee's wedding; probably it would be altogether looked down on, if at all noticed, by the county families to whose ranks, by right of descent, at any rate, the bride belonged; but there were elements of happiness in it not to be despised, nevertheless—two young, loving, and true hearts, a firm resolve on either side faithfully to keep the vows there plighted, with God's help; talent and industry with the bridegroom—entire confidence in him, trust and love with the lovely gentle bride.

Reuben Hernshaw, his children, and his wife, now perfectly recovered, with the old Sawyers to whom Hernshaw had kindly lent a cart to get over to see "dear young Miss marr'd," were the only spectators in the church. Deborah had betrayed the day and hour to Reuben in confidence. "There should be one of the old tenants there anyhow," she resolved within herself when making up her mind to this—and so there was, and more. Mabel was greeted, on her coming forth from church a bride, by such a shower of white primulas, and the old-fashioned everlastings, and one little heap of early snowdrops, that it was literally a flower-strewn path, winter though it was, down which she walked to Dr. Armsdaile's carriage, at her service for the occasion.

Her eyes grew moister than they were before,

as she turned them, with a gentle, grateful smile, on young Reuben, who, with his three elder brothers and sisters, had arranged this pleasant greeting for her. The young lad flushed up, and looked quite proud and happy, as he read the pleasure so plainly written on her face. He "knew Miss Mabel would like it, he did—she was so mortal fond of flowers—and so she did." This conviction more than rewarded him for all the pains he had been at, to nurse the snowdrops into such early blossoming, and to collect all the other flowers from every gardener in the neighbourhood with whom he could scrape acquaintance.

The very same New Year's morning that saw Mabel made Frank Marsden's wife, dawned on Sarah Lockstone in her solitary room in the old house in the High Street. She and Rachel had been very busy the day before, sorting, burning, arranging, not only papers, but various other possessions long left undisturbed in the old dwelling-place.

Their work was over now, and Sarah sat absorbed and moody in the familiar sitting-room. Her face was to the full as pale as it had become on that moonlight night on which she went to Hamer's Heath, and made so fearfully the discovery she had sought. It was even more ghastly, or perhaps the deep black in which she was robed might

give it that appearance, but, at any rate, there were new stern lines about the mouth and brow, that something, other than any such contrast, had traced there.

She sat, her head leaning on her hand, in a sullen reverie, which Rachel's occasional entrance never roused or seemed to disturb her from. A large sealed packet lay on the table by her elbow, but beyond that the room was empty except its ordinary furniture; the hard horsehair chairs ranged each side the wall, the threadbare old carpet, the ungarnished mantelpiece, beneath which a dull fire smouldered—all looked dreary, desolate beyond expression; and so Harry Neville thought when, an hour later, he hurried with eager, hasty steps into the room, exclaiming,

"At last! Oh! Sarah, you have tried my faith almost beyond endurance—six whole weeks!"

"Only six!" Sarah said, dreamily looking up into his handsome young face with a new, strange expression on her own. "Six weeks! I should have said it had been months."

"Should you?" and a bright glad light shone in his blue eyes; "then you have missed your banished lover, dearest? Ah! why did you subject me to so unnecessary a probation?"

Sarah never answered; with her eyes still fixed

on his face, and wandering over every feature, she seemed learning them by heart—fixing them in her memory. He held the hand that had been lying idly on her lap in his, and presently he spoke again—

"I have felt so very much for and with you, my love, and so have we all; but you might have let me share, if I could not comfort, your sorrow," and he, too, looked anxiously on her face—on the lines that he believed grief had traced there.

"No, Harry Neville, it is best as it is. But you do honestly love me, I know that now. Stay —listen. If I were to die, would you take care of creatures I had cared for in my life? Don't go into the rhapsodies you know I hate," she added, with something of her old impatience in her manner, "but answer honestly."

"Of course I would, but——"

"I have grown to have a strange liking for Jetty, and I would never have her fall into indifferent hands. Will you keep her ever, whatever may chance to me?"

"My dearest, yes! I——"

"Very well. Remember your promise, Harry —I depend on its fulfilment, should the time ever come to prove its truth."

"I trust and pray it never may, but I have no

fears you would have any cause to reproach me if it did; we have been long enough apart, and I hope we may never be so again."

A faint smile, somewhat of the old character, flitted over Sarah's face, and then she answered—

"I am not equal to talking of all I wish to say to you, Harry; but here, in this packet, you will find everything. Be careful of it. Promise me it shall not leave your own hands till you have safely locked it in your desk. Other interests than yours are concerned in its safe keeping."

"I will carry it straight home with me, and open it at once."

"No. I have a whim that you should not do it on New Year's Day. I do not ask you to indulge it—I know you will. Open it to-morrow, as soon as you like; but be alone when you do so, and secure, if possible, from interruption."

"You are a very tantalising ladye faire," Harry said, with a happy, loving smile; "always putting my impatient temper to trials it abhors and kicks at. But you know you are safe, Sarah. I love you too well to risk adding to your trials by so much as a straw, and whatever your wishes, whims or not, they are laws to me."

Sarah smiled again, more pleasantly this time; again she scanned the young man's open face, saying presently,

"Harry, I am in no mood for talking to-day, as I have said before, take the packet, and —go!"

The last word came after a pause, and in so low a tone and so utterly unlike her usual voice, that he looked suddenly, questioningly into her eyes. They told him nothing, wearing still that strange dreamy look so new to them; but suddenly she rose, and took from the table-drawer a pair of scissors, while, with a faint streak of red tinging her marble face, she said,

"Grant me another of my whims. I have a fancy to take off that long curl tickling your ear. May I?"

"May you!" and flushing with pleasure, the young man stooped his head.

She bent over it, and he fancied, though he dared not believe in the idea, that something like a kiss was pressed on his auburn curls before she released him, saying,

"There, it is done; and now, once more, go!"

There was no hesitation in the enunciation of the word this time. It rang out loud and firm; he had, he saw, no choice but obedience. He took the packet she held out to him, lingeringly secured it in the inner pocket of his coat, then took both her hands in his, and gazing on her, said pleadingly,

"I may come again to-morrow?"

"If you wish it," and as she spoke, Sarah slightly bent her head towards him—whether to conceal her face, or to allow him the advantage he immediately took of pressing his lips on her forehead, remained doubtful. She did not resent the liberty, however, only withdrew her hands from his, and pointed silently to the door; one long, loving look, and he was gone.

Sarah waited till she heard the outer door close behind him, and then walked to the window, and strained her eyes to watch him as he rode down the street, and away out into the open country; past the Manor he would go, and her face set as the thought came, and she turned away from the window with something between a sigh and a strange, unearthly laugh.

"Well, it is done now—done; no more doubts, no more waverings, there is comfort in that, at any rate. I am weary to death of them—and as to the rest——Every woman is a fool once in her life, they say—a man is never anything else, I think," and there she paused in her muttered soliloquy, and drew forth the chestnut curl that she had thrust away into her pocket. She looked at it long and earnestly, then unfastened the chain and locket from her person, and placed the curl with some care within the latter. "There," she continued, having readjusted it about her neck, "that is done too.

What good?—what good? Bah! Anyhow, all is over—and now for a new life!"

She rang the bell, and, as Rachel came in, said, in the cold tone of former days,

"Is all in order, Rachel, and the time come for you to change your mind?"

"If you wait for that, Miss Sarah, you'll wait long enough—I've agreed to the thing, and I'll keep to it."

Sarah looked long and searchingly at the bright eyes and lined face of the old servant, and then answered,

"Very well, at dusk, mind. Is the dog quiet?"

"Yes, as quiet as need be, poor fellow!"

"And Robert, does he quite understand he is to take Jetty to Castle Neville the first thing to-morrow morning?"

"Yes," was the laconic answer.

That evening at dusk the gossips of High Street would have liked to see, but could not, a post-chaise and pair from a neighbouring town drive up to Stephen Lockstone's old house, where two women, closely veiled, accompanied by a dog, got into it and drove away.

Harry Neville was not a heavy sleeper at any time, and on the morning of the second of January

he woke earlier than usual, after a feverish excited sleep; and no sooner had he convinced himself that that New Year's Day had honestly passed away than he jumped up, and after making a hurried toilet, wrapped himself warmly up in a dressing-gown and fur-lined overcoat, and set himself down to examine the packet given him by the woman he had learned to love so passionately.

Before he had well gone through all its contents, his face was nearly as pale as her own had become; and it was well, if he wished to escape too inquisitive maternal comments, that he did not appear at breakfast that morning, but, long before the bell for it had rung, was galloping full speed to Merestown. He went straight up to the house in the High Street. The shutters were still closed, and no signs of life about the house; nor were there more when his groom had battered the door, and woke the echoes of the empty passages by a tenth peal at knocker and bell. As his master sat, gazing in mute despair at the upper windows, a shambling old man came toddling up, and touching his hat, said,

"Nobody's there, please, sir; you don't want to buy the house, do you, sir? it's to be sold, and Mr. Hawk's to put the bills up this morning."

All was true, then, and she was gone; and with a sick pained heart, poor Harry turned his horse

slowly towards Newman's Buildings, and there learned from Deborah the unexpected tidings of Mr. Marsden's marriage with Mabel Lee, and the absence of both of them from No. 5, at the present time.

"Not back for a week, you say?" questioned Harry, in a dull mechanical way; "are you quite sure?"

"Quite, sir; next Monday they'll be back—not before."

"I will come again on Monday, and will you tell Mr. Marsden I must see him at the earliest moment that I can, on a matter of the utmost importance to—to the Lee family."

It was lucky poor Harry Neville added that. Deborah pricked up her ears at it, and delivered the message verbatim to Frank when he and Mabel returned late on the Monday night.

"And he'll be here to-morrow, by ten, he said to-day," concluded Deborah.

And so he was—a sad gloomy-looking man, not stopping, not talking much, but simply putting some papers into Frank's hands, and telling him that thus he had fulfilled a solemn trust he had received.

What the young husband's feelings were when he saw what those papers were can be more easily imagined than described. The mystery was out.

The paper abstracted from the cabinet was that of the most consequence among those now restored to the family they most concerned. Well might the poor old invalid mutter about its safety in his hazy remembrance of its purport, which was, indeed, all-important to his family.

It was nothing less than the original deed cutting off the entail. How stupid, how blind Frank must have been, he thought, not to think, when only the copy was forthcoming, duly registered and enrolled in the Court of Chancery though it was, that there might be something behindhand—but he never had; and now here, tacked on to the very deed itself, was a memorandum, in old Mr. Lee's handwriting, to the effect that he had quite intended reversing his own hasty act, and renewing the entail, with his dear son Edward's consent and approval, had he not discovered that the date of the deed's signing had rendered it null and void.

How eagerly Frank turned to the date and compared it with the one noted down in his pocket-book, as being that in the copy acted on in Stephen Lockstone's possession. Ha! a discrepancy surely enough. The original deed bore the date of the 12th—that on the copy was the 21st. It had been erased—altered, and for reason good, had any mortal had sense enough, as Frank angrily thought,

to remember about it, and look into it. Why had the idea not occurred to him?

The fact was that the little child, the first-born of the present Mr. Lee and his wife, Mabel's eldest brother, had its premature birth on the 11th of that same month; and feeble as the little light of its life had been, and soon extinguished, to the mother's bitter grief, it had flickered on to the evening of the 20th—and thus no cutting off of the entail was possible to the father and grandfather during those nine days; while the deed, having been signed, on one of them was invalid and worthless.

How simple an explanation, and that the poor imbecile should have a dim perception of it all the time, and yet be unable to remember or express it!

The other papers were those contained in Tony Hicks's pocket-book—an exact copy of the deed, the date unaltered, a certificate of the baptism and death of the little baby, on whose short life such weighty things depended, and the address of the English clergyman, still living at Frankfort, who had both baptised and buried the little one.

Stephen Lockstone, in his over-care and cunning, had somewhat outwitted himself in the matter. His original design had been to tamper with the dates of the infant's birth, and it was with this object he had sent Tony Hicks to Frankfort directly

the parents had left, to ascertain who the clergyman was, what sort of character he bore, the care bestowed on the registration of births and deaths in that city, and other items which he imagined might be useful.

Subsequent events proved all this to have been very unnecessary trouble and expense, while its only result was to give a man, almost as cunning and unscrupulous as he, an inkling of matters he need never have suspected, and a certain power over himself. True, Tony did not know the exact object of the researches he was sent on—probably less than the fears of his plotting master suggested he did; but he had wit enough to conceal how little he did know, and Stephen Lockstone was only too glad to make a somewhat hard bargain with him, to get him out of the country altogether.

The death of the old squire, and the illness of the young one, happening so opportunely as they did, prevented any discussion of the deed between them, after the elder man had become aware of its being quite useless and invalid. The lawyer knew the man with whom, should he discover this, he would have to deal. He searched for the deed which the elder Mr. Lee had asked for and received before his death; possibly because he had begun to mistrust the honesty of his steward, and wished to endorse it with his own hand, to call his

son's attention to the true state of the case. In vain! It had been safely hidden away with some old treasured letters of the dead man's youth, and it was not till the present Mr. Lee had been goaded on to his present state of imbecility, that even he had ever seen it. He found it at the very time that Stephen Lockstone had begun to show his true colours and real intentions—found it, and for the time realised its nature and importance.

But, alas! with the strange infatuation which often characterises the actions of an enfeebled mind, the only use he made of the discovery was to hide the paper away in the secret drawer of the old cabinet; and instead of speaking of it openly to his wife, or doctor, or even to Mabel, the only person to whom he did speak of it was Stephen Lockstone himself—thus putting him on his guard, and raising fresh fears and doubts in his mind, but in no wise stopping the execution of his designs.

Indeed, after a time, he began to think the poor old man could not have found the paper at all—that it was not in existence, very probably, as he had asserted when the copy was acted on, and that it was only from an old memory of some past private talk on the subject with his father, suddenly re-awakened, that he so unexpectedly accused him of knowing the invalidity of the deed, and yet acting on it. As time went on, this comfortable idea

grew and strengthened, though there were seasons when the fear that he might be mistaken returned on him with a violence which made it unreasoning; and the sudden reappearance on the scene of Tony Hicks precisely at the time when very, unwillingly, he had taken possession of the Manor, before he had wound himself up to the step, so increased his terrors, that they took hold on him more like a monomania than ever.

Tony had grown more cunning and more desperate; he saw his old master quietly possessed of the Lees' house and lands, and putting this and that together, he made a tolerably shrewd guess at the state of the case, and fairly charged the lawyer with the deed he had been guilty of. Stephen Lockstone endeavoured to mislead this troublesome witness as to some at least of his, to say the least, suspicious proceedings, and believed, very mistakenly, that he had partially at least succeeded. It was not so, however, and his final interview showed to the terror-stricken, enraged man, that Tony had even made a guess at the felonious substitution of date he had been guilty of, to make assurance doubly sure. Very uselessly, too, for poor Edward Lee the younger, as unbusiness-like a man as ever inherited a vast landed estate, never gave one thought to the difference which might be made by his poor baby's premature birth, nor, con-

sequently, to the possible date of the deed.

What a strange tale had good Dr. Armsdaile to hear when he came to take his farewell, as he had anticipated, of his beloved friends, that same Tuesday at noon. They were not going—No. 5, Newman's Buildings must keep them a little longer; and when they did go, it would be back to the Manor House—Lee Manor still.

Frank feared there might be some difficulty, more expense, and that some considerable time might elapse before they could do this, and reclaim all the moneys nefariously taken possession of by Stephen Lockstone, but of their ultimately doing so there was not a doubt. All was clear as the noon-day. No lawyer would dare to dispute the matter in face of such evidence as he held, and he triumphantly whirled the papers round his head in his joy. Besides, as Miss Lockstone had restored the papers voluntarily, it was probable she would rather aid than hinder the speedy resumption of their rights, extraordinary as it appeared to him that she should do so, after all that had passed—all that he suspected.

This proved to be the case. Sarah herself had disappeared altogether from the neighbourhood—from the county—and not all Harry Neville's endeavours could discover a trace of her present whereabouts. She, Rachel, and the faithful dog,

Charon, had all disappeared together; but it appeared she had previously instructed Mr. Hawk, the present attorney in Merestown, to inform Mr. Lee's solicitor that no opposition steps whatever would be taken to the proving of that gentleman's continued right to the estate of his ancestors; and that, further, a large sum of money had been left in his care to be handed over to Mr. Lee, as part compensation for some of his own which had been fraudulently appropriated.

Before summer came again, old Mrs. Sawyer had the pleasure of opening the Lodge gates to her own rightful master once more, she and her husband having been reinstated in their old home, with an increase of pension. How joyful was their welcome at the Manor House itself, where most of the old servants had managed to return, where Mr. and Mrs. Ravenshaw, Dr. Armsdaile, the Hernshaws, a few more of the old tenants, Frank and Mabel, their American uncle, and, best of all, the heir, sprung up from a smooth-faced stripling to a handsome, bearded man—young Ned Lee himself—awaited them. To Mrs. Lee it was almost overpowering. The old man not only bore it well, but returned the loud cheers and greetings with unusual dignity and extreme pleasure; it seemed to restore to him for the time much of the sense and reason so long clouded.

Thanks nominally to the exertions of Messrs. Sharpe, Kewter, and Watchemklose, really to those of Frank Marsden, the affairs of Lee Manor were soon placed in such order, that a few years' care and economy would clear the estate of every incumbrance not already paid by the foreclosing of the mortgages, when Stephen Lockstone bought the chief of them up.

By the time young Reuben Hernshaw, educated for the purpose, took proud, delighted possession of his new office of steward to the Lee Manor estate, it was in as prosperous a condition as it had ever known in the palmiest days of its riches, and the county families were only too glad to cultivate the closest intimacy admissible with the family, especially with Ned Lee's young wife, the eldest Miss Raymond; and how proudly Deborah received the many noble visitors to her own peculiar domain, the nursery, once more, when another baby Edward Lee made his appearance, to promise the safe continuance of the Lee Manor heirs in the direct line!

CHAPTER XVI.

NEWMAN'S BUILDINGS were beginning to look—well, not quite so bright and new as they had done thirty years before. Stephen Lockstone's old house in the High Street had been lately let to a milliner, and the old gable windows were full of bonnets, mutely asking for heads to wear them. Of all its old inhabitants, none knew or cared to ask now; two were in their one grave in the churchyard. Mrs. Geldfinder and her husband might, or might not, be still pursuing, the one ease, the other wealth, in London, or elsewhere; the Merestown world had ceased to talk of, even to remember them, while of Sarah nothing had been heard or seen since that New-Year's Day when she left the town in company with her old servant.

Poor imbecile Mr. Lee had for many years now been lying at rest in the vault of his ancestors. Dr. Armsdaile, too, and the old rector and his wife, had passed away, but Lee Manor was not destitute of many cherished inmates, and a still

wider circle of staunch, warm friends. Old Mrs. Lee, as she had been called for many a year now, still lived, loved and honoured, amid her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren; and now, in this glorious summer morning, when the sun, not long risen, is promising an almost too hot day, and the subsiding wind is taking a long farewell, intending that the only air which shall visit the park and gardens to-day shall come from the birds' and butterflies' wings, grand preparations are going on already within the Manor House, early as it is—for the youngest daughter of the house will be a bride this morning, and all her family are assembled within to do her honour on the occasion.

Brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews—a tiny tribe those latter—Sir Frank and Lady Marsden—it is whispered by the knowing ones that Sir Frank, Solicitor-General, will soon have a peerage offered him—their family, and the six little grandchildren, the children of her two daughters and her eldest son, who have hardly ceased to astonish the good baronet yet by calling his still soft-cheeked, brown-haired Mabel "grandmamma."

Each and all are at the Manor, to see a young Mabel Lee plight her troth at the altar to a young Lord Neville, son, not to the former Lord Neville—he died a bachelor after all, in the midst of his

books and curiosities—but to Harry Neville, now Earl of Avonsdale, who, having sought his first love long and vainly, and mourned her disconsolately for longer than his lady-mother liked, had at length taken a wife from a distant county, more fitted to hold the position she would be called on to fill, and more agreeable altogether to every member of his family.

As the Earl was that morning breakfasting in his dressing-room, preparatory to accompanying his son to the little church close by Lee Manor, where he was to be married, he looked through the heap of letters and papers the post had brought to him that day.

Suddenly a change passed over the aged but still open and handsome face, and his hands trembled as he hastily endeavoured to untie a packet, sealed with black wax, and tied round with black silk. Her hand at last, after so many years, and—ah! She must be gone, then; as the paper flies open and there lies disclosed the locket that he gave her so many years ago, his own chestnut hair within, and —yes, there is a note.

"I have kept my promise, Harry Neville—in life I never parted from this locket. When you receive it I shall be at rest beneath the skies of that foreign land which has been my refuge for so many years.

"You, too, have kept your promise. I know that Jetty lived and died a petted horse in your paddocks. I know that the Lees, as all others, remain ignorant of the part I acted in those old days which seem so near and yet so far away to me now.

"And you kept your love for me, Harry Neville, and that though I bade you not. Could you know the whole truth, and yet seek her who had done all you would most have reprobated? I hoped not, and yet perhaps I would not have had it different. But you are happy now—happy with your children, and with a wife far better suited to you than I could ever have been. Do you ever think of me still?

"Yes, I feel—I know you do, and that you will bless and thank me for telling you that it was your pure honest love, your unswerving trust and confidence, that woke what better nature I possessed—awoke it to a fearful struggle with that other life-long acting one, wherein I knew not till the very end which would be the victor.

"But the higher and the better won at last, and it has triumphed farther. I am at peace at last, and can say with knowledge and faith, God bless you for it, Harry Neville, and farewell!"

THE END.

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